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HURST & BLACKETT, 13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT

BY

JOHN MILLS

AUTHOR OF

“THE OLD ENGLISH GENTLEMAN,”

“TOO FAST TO LAST,”

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.


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ON THE SPUR OF THE MOMENT.

CHAPTER I.

It was a pretty picture, criticise as you might from any point of the compass. Framed by the surrounding and drooping branches of an apple-tree in full bloom there sat Griselda Peepem, in a careless, languid attitude, with a large red and white spaniel stretched at full length on the grass at her feet. The dog had his nose snugly resting between his fore paws, with his eyes turned upwards upon the face of his young mistress, and if ever a look displayed unqualified devotion at what he

saw, it was in the concentrated gaze fixed in the worship of his idol, Griselda Peepem.

‘Well, Sam!’ said she, with a slight toss of her head so as to throw the clustering golden ringlets aside from her brow, ‘well, Sam!’ repeated she, in a listless, dreamy tone and manner. ‘I wish that we had something to do.’

Sam acquiesced by one gentle sweep of the end of his tail.

‘I hate being idle,’ continued she, without displaying the smallest practical objection of being so.

Sam yawned a doubtful affirmative.

‘And yet when I am not idle, resumed Griselda, ‘aunt says that I am always doing something wrong, or very wrong, as the case may be.

Sam assented by a kind of suppressed inward growl.

‘By some strange fatality,’ continued Griselda, almost peevishly, ‘I am sure to do exactly the opposite of what I know to be right, and just the contrary to what I intended to carry out as a good intention.’

Sam gave a signal of assent by lifting up his head, and, throwing his ears back, closed one eye.

‘Be polite enough, Sam,’ continued his mistress, ‘to open the other eye. At the present moment you look as if winking at me, sir, with almost an expression of insolence.’

Sam, however, kept the offending eye shut, and took no notice of the request.

Griselda Peepem, shifting her arm upon which her head rested lazily on the elbow of the garden-seat, lifted a large sheet of pasteboard from the ground, and began sketching with a crayon pencil

the likeness of Sam lying at her feet, who still appeared to wink deliberately in the face of his mistress.

There the two remained in their respective positions, the sketcher and the sketched.

For a few minutes no interruption took place in the progress of Griselda's task ; but, an approaching footstep attracting her attention, she temporarily left the point of the pencil resting upon the pasteboard, and turned to see her maiden aunt and sole custodian, Penelope Peepem, who with erect figure and measured tread, was rendering the distance shorter by degrees and palpably less which separated them and the apple-tree.

‘Now, Sam,’ observed Griselda, in a tone of voice only to be heard by Sam, ‘now, Sam,’ repeated she, ‘we are in for a lecture.’

Sam instinctively opened his jaws with as profound and wide a yawn as was ever given by an animal, biped or quadruped, knowing that he was about to be tired out.

‘You are completing, I suppose, your drawing-lesson, Griselda?’ said her aunt, upon arriving at and stooping under the branches of the apple-tree. ‘Signor Vesprucci will be here in a few minutes.’

‘I’m afraid, aunt dear,’ replied her niece, and as she spoke a little musical, suppressed laugh was heard, although no outward effect was seen of the audible but invisible cause. ‘I’m afraid, aunt dear,’ repeated she, ‘that Signor Vesprucci will not be pleased with the progress made in my drawing-lesson.’

‘If my memory,’ replied Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘is not more than ordinarily treacherous, a circumstance by no means

improbable, the signor gave you the head of Tiberius Cæsar to copy in chalk upon a slightly-tinted yellow ground.'

A little, merry chuckle was heard ; but Griselda's features wore a most serious and even stoical expression. Sam was laughing to himself, perhaps at the thought of having recently robbed the cat.

'I fear, aunt,' said Griselda, 'that Signor Vesprucci will hardly consider that a fair copy of the head of Tiberius Cæsar,' and, as she spoke, she handed the very sketchy outlines of Sam, as he sat for his portrait with one eye closed.

'Tiberius Cæsar !' exclaimed Miss Penelope Peepem, raising her voice to something like a screech with unfeigned astonishment as she glanced at the unfinished portrait. 'Why, it is the likeness of that rebellious Sam, and I must say,' continued she, lowering the tone to softer notes, 'a

most excellent likeness, but vulgarised by the low expression of his closed eye. In fact, winking.'

'So I told him,' quietly responded her niece; 'but, as usual, he took no notice whatever of my request, and I had to draw him with the wink which you reasonably object to.'

'Reasonably object to!' ejaculated her aunt, stepping backwards and regarding Griselda and Sam with a look intended to convey withering scorn. 'What can—what will Signor Vesprucci say to this act of wilful insubordination, amounting to little short of high treason, combined with mutiny?'

'I told you so, Sam,' rejoined Griselda, shaking her head reprovingly. 'I knew that you would get me into another scrape. You hear what you have done. I almost prayed that you would not wink at me.'

‘Prayed that he would not wink at you!’ repeated Miss Penelope Peepem, in a tone of great severity, posing on one foot between advancing and retreating. ‘I am not censuring your rebellious dog for any share of the misconduct on his part, but you, Griselda Peepem, for setting even the laws of decency at defiance.’

‘How very dreadful!’ returned her niece, with an accompaniment of the little laugh, although not a trace of mirth could be seen upon her features, which remained smooth and unruffled. ‘How very dreadful!’ repeated she. ‘But what particular act of indecency have I committed, aunt dear?’

‘I refer,’ was the reply, with great dignity in tone and manner, ‘to Tiberius Cæsar. The lesson given you by Signor Vesprucci was to draw that historically-renowned head of the Roman Emperor,

and instead of which you have substituted Sam's with a vulgar and, consequently, objectionable expression of countenance.'

'I was very wrong,' rejoined Griselda, raising a remarkably small and well-shaped foot in a threatening attitude, 'and I feel much disposed to kick Sam.'

Sam drew back the angles of his jaws to the fullest extent, and if ever a dog laughed at the fun of the thing, he did.

'I cannot see how the responsibility of this most reprehensible conduct of yours, Miss Griselda Peepem, can be transferred to your dog,' returned her aunt. 'He too often participates in your mischief and total disregard of all rules of decorum, and, I must add, of propriety for a girl of your age, who seems to entirely forget that the time has arrived for a positive change from childish tricks to acquire the accomplishments of a lady in order that

she may take her proper place in county society. But what do I see?' she ejaculated, as a somewhat strangely-dressed figure stood before her, grinning with evident delight at the opportunity of presenting himself in—as he called it—'his fresh moult.'

'Oh!' returned Griselda, languidly. 'It's Robin in his new clothes which I made entirely for him. Don't you admire them, aunt dear?'

Miss Penelope Peepem slowly raised a pair of strong magnifying glasses, and began a measured and critical examination of Robin's 'fresh moult,' beginning from his feet to his head.

'You will observe,' said her niece, with a serious face, but with an inward laugh, 'that his legs are encased in elastic black worsted tights, which I knitted with praiseworthy industry and patience to

imitate as closely as possible the slender limbs of a robin. The waistcoat, you will see, is bright red bordering on scarlet, which I worked in the same material to copy—I think successfully—the breast of a robin. The jacket of brown velvet, which certainly is a misfit and baggy, I made from an old garment of yours, aunt dear, which I disentombed from a chest long since forgotten, I should say, from the cobwebs and dust in which it was enshrined.’

At this particular juncture Miss Penelope Peepem slowly raised her hand with an involuntary movement and kept a fixed stare upon the ‘misfit.’

‘The close and small skull-cap of the same material,’ continued she, ‘I also designed from a piece of the old brown velvet, and the general effect seems to me that Robin, from a close resemblance,

merits the title and distinction I intend that he should henceforth be known by. I now,' said Griselda, after a short pause, 'call him Cock Robin.'

The individual to whom personal reference was being made here grinned in a manner which showed that he almost revelled in the addition to his name, whether family or otherwise.

'And from what cause has this new outrage been designed?' inquired her aunt, in a tone trespassing upon the haughty combined with the indignant.

'You will recollect,' responded Griselda, with an elastic manner of extreme ease if not of indifference, 'that Gazelle, in a sharp run of last season, jumping short, nearly fell backwards into a deep ditch, where Cock Robin laid with his heels resting upon the margin to all intents and purposes buried—absolutely buried.'

‘Well?’ snappishly interrogated her aunt.

‘Had he been a little more externally conspicuous,’ resumed the narrator, ‘supposing even that his legs only had been then as they are now——’

Cock Robin glanced at his legs with admiration which, incased as they were in ‘tights,’ showed off their form and shape, as he thought, to supreme advantage, and the expression of his features was that of gratified pride, if not of pourtrayed vanity.

‘Easily to be seen if not admired,’ continued Griselda, placing the back of her head upon her hand in a languid attitude as she surveyed the tights. ‘I should have pulled a few inches either to the near or off side, and so avoided the imminent risk of rendering Cock Robin as flat as any fritter that was ever fried.’

‘I quite expect that the poor lad will

meet with a violent end some day,' remarked Miss Lucretia Peepem, deprecatingly.

Cock Robin drew back the angles of his mouth to the full limits of their stretching powers, and exhibited a remarkable even and sound set of molars and incisors; but maintained a strict silence upon the subject.

'So do I,' rejoined her niece, with supreme and most philosophical indifference, 'and I should not be extremely surprised if, eventually, he comes to be hanged.'

Cock Robin was still silent; but his round, ruddy cheeks looked at the final point of cracking with the storage of mirth depicted in them.

'And this is your explanation of your having dressed the poor boy in so absurd and grotesque a garb!' returned her aunt, cynically.

‘Safety for the future to some of his bones,’ added Griselda, ‘and immunity from being flattened into the shape of a muffin almost assured. Nothing, I think, could possibly be more considerate or even charitable in carrying out the design.’

Sam threw himself upon his back, and began rolling in a kind of convulsive ecstasy. The design, as he thought, defied improvement.

‘In my opinion, which I have expressed upon several opportune occasions,’ resumed her aunt, with marked emphasis, ‘the time has arrived for a complete and perfect end to be put to these childish absurdities. You are now, Miss Griselda Peepem, about entering your sixteenth year.’

‘How very sad!’ murmured her niece. ‘I’m growing, then, quite old.’

‘Old enough,’ rejoined Miss Penelope

Peepem, with all the severity that she could command with the prompt aid of her reserve forces, 'to know better.'

'How very sad!' repeated her niece, shaking her head mournfully. 'Old enough to know better, and yet without any reasonable hope, so far as I can see, of the smallest improvement. How very sad!'

'If true,' returned Miss Penelope Peepem, without relaxing any of the austerity of her address, 'most sad. As I have told you very often——'

Griselda sighed.

'Accompanied by ill-concealed and infinite impatience on your part, that your long and well-sustained character of Tom-boy should be discarded altogether for the more dignified and elegant deportment of a young lady about to be introduced into the best county society.'

'I much prefer that of Gazelle, Cock

Robin, and Sam,' added her niece, 'to any society I have yet seen.'

Sam evidently appreciated the flattering compliment paid to his companionship, and, with a loud bark, began running round in a wide circle, with the apple-tree for a common centre.

'Pray make that noisy and ill-mannered dog of yours quiet,' said Miss Penelope Peepem, 'while I conclude the very few words I have to say.'

Griselda's spirits rose at the announcement that her aunt's speech was limited in its finish to a few words.

'Pending the short interval of your introduction to the best county society,' recommenced Miss Penelope Peepem, 'it becomes a paramount duty which you owe to yourself to apply assiduously to your respective studies, and become mistress of the arts and sciences.'

A little ebullition of mirth was heard, not seen.

‘In these days of progressive refinement,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, with great and even stiff dignity, ‘what is a young lady without the usual, and, I may add, the *unusual* accomplishments?’

‘A kind of fossil, I suppose,’ was the quiet reply.

‘Not even presentable to ordinary society,’ resumed Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘to say nothing of the best county circles.’

‘I have no desire to enter them,’ responded her niece, ‘any more than the best county circles desire for my entering them. I have no money, aunt dear.’

‘But if you became mistress of the arts and sciences——’

‘In the meantime,’ interrupted her niece, springing suddenly from her seat,

‘let me have a gallop on Gazelle. Go and saddle her, Cock Robin. You shall give me a lead over a few flights of hurdles. She always jumps better with a lead.’

‘But take a pull at her if she gets too close to me, Miss Grizzle,’ interposed her personal attendant. ‘She made a sharpish snap when too near to be pleasant the last time we had a Grand National.’

‘I thought that her teeth, I must admit, came together rather viciously as she cleared that last hurdle,’ rejoined Griselda, carelessly.

‘And with her ears thrown back, Miss Grizzle,’ added Cock Robin, placing a hand significantly behind him, ‘she made an ugly try on to savage me.’

‘It shall not occur again,’ returned his young mistress, with a laugh which, instead of being hidden or suppressed, was carried down the wind to where echo re-

peated it in ringing mocking mirth. 'I will take care that Gazelle does not get too close for the future. Go and saddle her, Cock Robin.'

With this mandate Cock Robin took an abrupt departure with his round, red-apple looking face beaming with delight at the thought of having another Grand National in which he was to take, as usual, a leading part.

'And what excuse or apology am I to offer Signor Vesprucci?' inquired Miss Penelope Peepem, as if having met with a recent personal affront or injury. 'He will expect as a natural consequence of this being the day of your taking your drawing lesson a complete head in chalk of Tiberius Cæsar.'

'There is no alternative, as far as I can see,' responded her niece, 'but his accepting Sam's instead.'

Sam at this juncture had another vigorous roll on the grass, and seemed to enjoy the joke to the fullest extent.

‘May I ask, Miss Griselda Peepem,’ said her aunt, with the utmost gravity, ‘by way of introducing Sam’s head instead of that of Tiberius Cæsar to Signor Vesprucci, may I ask,’ repeated she, ‘in what particular words you would like the excuse or justification to be made?’

‘You are so eloquent, dear aunt, in making excuses for me, and so skilled in practising the art,’ replied Griselda, ‘that no instructions could possibly improve your accomplished style.’

‘Signor Vesprucci,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘will naturally be greatly incensed at what will appear to him a deliberate insult.’

‘It was not intended,’ returned her niece, in a voice closely resembling the plaintive,

and looking very penitent, if not feeling so.

‘You invariably put forth this plea for every insubordinate act of your life,’ added her aunt, ‘and I begin to feel ashamed of myself for being weak enough to listen to it.’

‘Let me entreat,’ returned Griselda, in the same tone and manner, ‘that you will not exert any additional strength, however small, to set aside my one poor, little defence in doing things which I ought not to do, and leaving undone things which I ought to have done. What will become of me if you turn stony-hearted and deaf, dear aunt, to my one little defence, which has been *so* successful for long, long years?’ and then, raising a cambric pocket-handkerchief to her eyes, she slyly peeped from behind it, and looked with dramatic effect one of the most irresistible of penitents.

‘You always succeed in getting your own way,’ observed Miss Penelope Peepem, by way of parenthesis. ‘I suppose that I must strain a point to conciliate Signor Vesprucci.’

‘How very kind and affectionate of you to strain a point,’ responded her niece, warmly embracing her aunt and energetically kissing her on both cheeks. ‘Tell Signor Vesprucci that he shall have a meritorious copy of Tiberius Cæsar next week; but this morning I must yield to the temptation of having a gallop on Gazelle;’ and away she started with a bound like a roe-deer, from under the drooping branches of the apple-tree, with Sam close at her heels, barking loudly at what he already knew to be romping fun in store for both.

CHAPTER II.

UPON the boundary line of the western part of the New Forest, Hampshire, a house stood, upon which the gaze of the stranger seldom fell without expressed or entertained admiration for the natural beauties by which it was surrounded.

Quaint and old as the architecture was with its high sloping roof, gable ends, heavy casements, and small, diamond-paned lattices, which glittered, shone, and twinkled in the rays of the setting sun as he began to throw long, dark shadows upon the earth, a more modern edifice, perhaps,

would have failed to present so pleasing an effect as Forester's Lodge, built by no one remembers who, when, or for whom.

That it was long ago there could be no disputing, and generations, perhaps, of Rangers and Foresters, decked in green and gold, had come and gone without the faintest trace of their ever having been. The cedar, stretching its wide, flat, and dark green branches over the angular roof, had taken centuries to rear, and its thick and gnarled trunk bore evidence, at least, of the growth being anything but of the mushroom kind. Large holly bushes, planted in days long since passed away for the deer to browse upon the barbed and prickly leaves in winter, and called in the Saxon tongue 'Holm Trees,' formed thickets here and there, sufficiently dense to harbour as noble a stag as was ever hunted

by king or belted earl in greenwood glade, forest, or field.

It signified little where the spectator turned when within the clearly defined but small domain immediately pertaining to Forester's Lodge. The view presented was precisely the same north, south, east, and west. Hedged in, flanked, sheltered, hidden, surrounded, cradled, and almost buried among trees, bushes, and thickets of the growth of ages, it was barely practicable to catch a glimpse of the world without, albeit stirring scenes had taken place within the short range of a peashooter when, in the olden time, bow and arrow and hunting spear were deftly handled by Norman hands, and the bay of the sleuth hound heard as he stretched along in the outlaw's track.

This, however, was of the past.

Forester's Lodge was now occupied by

Miss Penelope Peepem, as it had 'been for a sufficient number of years to account for a commanding majority of silver threads in her hair in comparison with those of the nut-brown hue of the earlier days of her youth.

There was nothing, and had been nothing, particularly startling in the known life of any member of the somewhat prolific family of the Peepems. The common belief was that as each succeeding generation presented itself before the foot-lights of the world's stage it progressed in numbers as most families appear to do; but was unprogressive in the visible means of maintenance. The heirs male grew up into manhood with scarcely an exception from, it is supposed, the great and enduring strength of their several constitutions, and did either something or nothing in accordance with the physical or mental

capacity which they possessed or were found wanting in not possessing.

The heirs or heiresses female were not so fortunate; for, consistent with the unchallenged chronology of the Peepems of Forester's Lodge, New Forest, Hampshire, many in growing up into womanhood stopped prematurely short in the attempt, and so left the preponderance of numbers in the male representatives of the family as compared with the gentler sex.

History repeats itself, and as soon as Miss Penelope Peepem could be made or persuaded to understand anything at—it must be stated in justice to her ordinary powers of comprehension—the early age of lisping her requirements in imperfect English, she found herself one of eight in having six remarkably strong and muscular brothers, and one delicate, thin, and pale-faced sister, some years older than

herself. Being considerably the youngest of eight, in consequence of a decided check in the multiplication of the current generation of the Peepems, Penelope soon became acquainted with the commonplace fact that her brothers, after going to and returning from school at pretty regular and stated intervals, quitted the paternal roof one by one to seek, as she understood, their fortunes in other latitudes, and, consequently, longitudes, until all being gone, not a single muscular brother remained to teaze Penelope, or be teazed in return by her.

From remote and even distant regions letters came addressed to their father, Godfrey Peepem, Esquire, J.P., who, now and again, read aloud to his daughters and companions at the breakfast table lengthy extracts, the principal subject being an acknowledgment of the receipt of the last

remittance, or the affectionate hope that the fondly expected one would not be much longer delayed in coming into the absolute possession of the writer.

It appeared to Godfrey Peepem, Esquire, J.P., that his six muscular sons in seeking their respective and collective fortunes in far distant lands, took a prodigious and disappointing time in finding them.

At length came the turn of Penelope's sister, who possessed the unquestionable right and title of being spoken to and of as 'Miss Peepem.' She communicated to her father, at a chosen moment which she considered opportune, a strong inclination, amounting almost to an irrevocable decision, to insert her finger and thumb into the matrimonial basket of prizes and blanks, and place her maiden trust of sublunary bliss in the keeping of a tall, bony lieutenant, under immediate orders, as it

was said, for the West Indies ; a somewhat undefined address, perhaps, but still near enough for the temporary purpose of enlightening Godfrey Peepem, Esquire, J.P., from what particular quarter of the terrestrial globe he might reasonably expect to receive an addition to the usual kind of letters from foreign parts.

A parent's consent, without much apparent reluctance, was given to the union of the hands of Miss Peepem and her betrothed ; their hearts, in a figurative sense, having undergone a corresponding preliminary process at the termination of a waltz at the last county ball, where they met for the first time under the favourable conditions of both looking at their best.

Penelope cried like a child, as she was, when her sister took her departure from Forester's Lodge, but her tears, like all

tears that were ever shed since the first fell in grief or sorrow, were eventually dried by the soothing hand of time or her readily applied pocket-handkerchief.

The family being now reduced to herself and father—for Penelope had no memory of what the tender caresses of a mother were, she having died in her early infancy—they became the closest of friends and constant companions. Riding, driving, and walking, the little daughter was close to the side of Godfrey Peepem, Esquire, J.P.; and as day succeeded day in the rapidly passing years, although not moving with abnormal velocity, Penelope seemed to become more and more necessary to him as his associate, as the old man older grew.

Inheriting the property he possessed early in life, amounting to some two thousand a year from land in that part of

the county in which he lived, Godfrey Peepem enjoyed the luxury of doing nothing towards earning his own livelihood from what may, practically, be called the beginning of his mortal career to its close. His rent-roll being under the discretionary management of a local agent he did not interfere with his tenantry, and, as ends appeared to meet between his receipts and expenditure, things jogged on pleasantly enough from the beginning of each year successively to its close.

As a magistrate when he sat upon the bench, which was very seldom, his decisions were proverbial for being lenient and always mingled with mercy, except in poaching cases, when the delinquents were certain to meet with the extreme punishment, for Godfrey Peepem, Esquire, J.P., was fond of field sports, and deemed any unlawful interference with them as a crime

of the greatest magnitude to his king, country, and himself.

Be his merits or demerits, however, what they might, a day at length arrived which had only been postponed since that of his birth, and not to be avoided by the noblest born or the most humble, the richest or the poorest, the good or the bad, the wise or the otherwise.

A summons was served upon the magistrate himself, and he departed, it is to be hoped, in peace to answer it.

Penelope Peepem was alone.

CHAPTER III.

PINK and white blossom was no longer to be seen upon the apple-tree. Dried, crisp, and yellow leaves fell, and were falling, from its branches as Griselda Peepem and her aunt sat together at the breakfast-table in a snug, cosy room looking upon the lawn, after the first night of an early autumnal frost. Parts of the greensward which the pale rays of the sun had just reached glistened as if polished gems had been scattered by fairy hands far and wide, and thin threads of gossamer floated in the calm, clear, unruffled air. Summer

had gone, and the heralds of approaching winter trod closely in her footsteps.

‘I am glad that cub-hunting is nearly over,’ remarked Griselda, as she sat in a careless, negligent attitude in her chair; but not less graceful than Titania herself. ‘We shall have our first meet advertised, the squire told me, the week after next.’

Miss Penelope Peepem looked down her straight and somewhat pointed nose, screwed her lips tightly together as if more than prepared to speak; but still with an effort maintained a rigid and unbroken silence.

‘Gazelle was never in better form,’ resumed Griselda. ‘Two couple and a half of hounds this morning got away by themselves with a full-grown cub, and the squire holla’d me to get to their heads and stop them.’

Miss Penelope made a stiff and ceremonious bow.

‘They were going at racing pace,’ continued Griselda, crumbling a piece of bread upon the cloth between her fingers, and so much occupied with her very slight task that she did not appear to notice the frigid indifference with which her communication was being received. ‘They were going at racing pace,’ said her niece, ‘but as no one was near them but myself I put Gazelle’s head straight at a gate, and she never topped timber in better style.’

Again Miss Penelope Peepem bowed as if her spine was constructed of cast steel.

The eyes of her niece being fixed upon rendering the crumbs still smaller by manipulation, she failed to perceive the effect produced, and being increased in

production, upon her aunt's nervous system.

‘As soon as we cleared the gate, Gazelle was on her legs without a moment's pause, and in a grass field of about forty acres she flew along,’ said Griselda, with a flush crimsoning her cheeks as she spoke. ‘Having it all to ourselves, I was determined to get to the hounds' heads before they reached the next fence, a thick and high bullfinch, which I knew must stop us.’

Miss Penelope Peepem raised both her hands, and, pressing them upon her eyelids, appeared to be shutting out a scene from her mental vision which was too vivid to be pleasant.

‘I lifted my whip, but Gazelle knew what I wanted without touching her,’ continued her niece, as her large dark-

blue fearless eyes flashed between the long, silken lashes. 'With an effort worthy to be called supreme, she threw her whole heart into her work, and as the cubs slipped through the fence, not fifty yards in front of the hounds, she rushed forward and, getting to their heads, I cracked my thong and stopped them in full view of the squire who, lifting his cap, cried out, "Well done!"'

'Instead of which,' said Miss Penelope Peepem, gravely, 'had John Oakacre of Oakacre Court done his duty, he would have severely reprimanded you for running such an imminent risk of breaking some of your bones or even your neck.'

A ringing laugh burst from Griselda's lips.

'He never thought of that,' she replied, 'neither did I.'

'In the announcement of that reckless

disregard of all prudent safety,' rejoined her aunt, drawing herself up to her full height on the edge of her seat, and looking severity personified—rigid and inflexible; 'I am anything but surprised. Had the opposite been alleged I might, indeed, have been agreeably astonished. John Oakacre, as a young man, never had the reputation of being prudent.'

'I thought that he was one of your most ardent admirers,' observed Griselda, looking out of the corners of her eyes at her aunt, but without turning her head.

Miss Penelope Peepem coughed slightly, blushed slightly, and looked slightly stupid.

'Among others,' simpered she, whilst a long-drawn sigh struggled to escape her remarkably flat bosom, 'he might have been; but John Oakacre's heart was always

more absorbed in fox-hunting than devotion to the fair sex.'

'If I were a man so would mine be,' rejoined her niece, still engaged in crumbling the crumbs.

Miss Penelope Peepem felt exceptionally indignant at this voluntary declaration of unequivocal bad taste, or what appeared to be so ; but having, in a figurative sense, other fish to fry, she resolved that the particular subject under discussion should terminate without any further observation on her part.

After a brief but effective pause which, in itself, announced that the final stage had been reached, Miss Penelope Peepem cleared her throat of any real or imaginary obstacle, and commenced her already prepared address with,

'The time has arrived——'

Griselda gave a slight but audible groan.

‘The time has arrived,’ repeated her aunt, with a slight shake of the head which caused a small, white lace cap to flutter, expediently placed to conceal from view a circular, bald spot, ‘for you to become clearly acquainted with your present worldly condition and prospects, in order that there may be no mistake committed in dealing with the more important and most momentous future.’

If Miss Penelope’s sense of hearing did not deceive her, somebody not far off was indulging in a very subdued and quiet laugh, which was not, however, allowed to break the thread of her aunt’s eloquence or to interfere with its continuance to any serious extent. So far as outward appearances were concerned, Griselda’s features bore as serious an effect as could possibly be desired by the most sensitive of speakers.

J

‘The time has arrived——’

Another groan was heard, rather more distinct than the first.

‘For you to clearly understand,’ continued her aunt, dropping her words slowly and almost solemnly from her lips, ‘how much, if not all, depends upon yourself in occupying, at any rate, an enviable position in this world by making a good match, which means, in the simplest language that can be used perhaps, a rich husband.’

‘I have no objection,’ responded Griselda, carelessly, ‘to marry a rich husband, aunt dear. Where am I to find him?’

‘It is not my intention to flatter you with false hopes,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘but, upon becoming mistress of the arts and sciences, which I say with pride and pleasure that I afford you the daily opportunity of possessing in the ful-

ness of time, you will not have to seek for a rich husband. Eligible candidates will present themselves upon your introduction to the best county society, and I shall be proud beyond description to see my accomplished and popular niece,'—the little lace cap fluttered as if it was going to fly off and expose the bald spot, and the colour of her cheeks increased by several shades as she spoke—'the admired of many admirers.'

'And so shall I, aunt dear,' returned Griselda, with a merry, ringing laugh, 'if such an improbable event should happen. You seem to forget that I have no money.'

'It is the knowledge that you have none,' added Miss Penelope Peepem, with the utmost seriousness, 'that renders it indispensable for you to embrace and make the most of the favourable chances of entering the best county society, which

you will do at the next hunt ball. It will not surprise me if it is opened by John Oakacre and yourself, as it was thirty-five years since by him and me,' and the little lace cap fluttered from a sudden toss of the head, but not as if it were going to fly away.

'The dear old squire!' exclaimed her niece. 'It will give me the greatest pleasure to dance with him should he ask me.'

'That he will do I am quite certain,' added Miss Penelope Peepem, 'for you know what a pet you are of his. But now listen as patiently as you can to what I am going to say. The time has arrived——'

'Oh, aunt,' ejaculated Griselda, vehemently, 'it must have long since arrived. The time has always been arriving!'

'For you to learn from me,' continued Miss Penelope Peepem, without heeding

the interruption, 'the exact circumstances by which you have been and are surrounded, in order that no error may be committed on your part regarding the more important and most momentous future.'

At this juncture Miss Penelope Peepem slowly brought her nicely-starched and prettily-edged pocket-handkerchief to the corners of her eyes.

'Your father, mother, aunt Matilda Slomax, and five uncles,' she continued, after a brief interval of, perhaps, silent grief, 'have all gone, doubtlessly, to a much better world, and the history of each, strange, perhaps, to relate, bore a strong resemblance one to the other. They married on nothing, saved nothing, and left nothing.'

'Their heirs, then, had not much to thank them for,' observed Griselda.

'Your father, Captain Godfrey Peepem,

of the "Old Die-Hards," as his regiment was most irreverently called, in my opinion,' she resumed, with half-closed eyelids, 'no sooner saw your dear mother upon her arrival at Bombay than he yielded to what would appear to have been a constitutional impulse, and at once offered his hand and heart. She promptly accepted both, and the result of their union, which took place with all practicable despatch, was a pledge of their affections in the seasonable arrival of yourself who, sad to relate, experienced the irreparable loss of a most exemplary mother—although I never saw or scarcely heard of her before or since—within the limited space of two years of your birth.'

'I think, aunt dear,' remarked Griselda, with unmistakable weariness, 'that you have been kind enough to make me acquainted with all these particulars long since.'

Miss Penelope Peepem's domestic narrative, however, was not to be cut short so readily as her niece most fervently desired.

'If so,' continued she, with some degree of sharpness in her tone, 'they will bear repetition. Within six months of this truly lamentable occurrence an additional cause for mourning followed in the sudden decease of your doting father, Captain Godfrey Peepem, of the "Old Die-Hards." He died,' the speaker concluded the sentence with evident emotion, 'of tiffin.'

'Of tiffin!' exclaimed Griselda. 'I never heard of such a malady.'

'Let me be more strictly accurate,' added her aunt. 'I mean from the effects of tiffin. In most of the civilised parts of our Indian Empire, I believe, there is a mid-day refreshment called tiffin at which there are considerable quantities of brandy-pawnee consumed. Brandy-pawnee did

not agree with Captain Godfrey Peepem's constitution, and he died. He did.'

A slight choking sensation in the throat checked further progress in the family history for a few seconds, but Miss Penelope Peepem soon recovered her powers of speech.

'At less than the interesting but somewhat tiresome age of three years, you were intrusted to the tender and thoughtful care of a lady passenger from Bombay to England, designated, as I was subsequently given to understand, as a grass widow; the precise meaning of which I have searched for in several dictionaries, but, hitherto, without success.'

'In consequence, perhaps,' suggested Griselda, 'of her probably seeking fresh fields and pastures new.'

'Perhaps so, my dear,' responded her aunt. 'At any rate, she delivered you to

me upon her arrival at the Southampton Docks with a most impressive speech concerning the importance and sacredness of my trust. We shook hands with the utmost warmth, and parted on the deck of the ship upon which we had met a few minutes before, never having seen or heard of her from that day to this.'

'The grass widow, then, does not seem to have taken much permanent interest in the welfare of her charge,' remarked Griselda.

'Perhaps she possessed tender offspring of her own which absorbed both her time and attention,' rejoined her aunt. 'At any rate, we met and parted but once, and I hope that my feeling upon the subject was reciprocated on her part, as I certainly was not anxious for the interesting scene to be repeated,' and here the lace cap

threatened to fly off, and publish the bald spot, from a little explosion of mirth for which, perhaps, it was not altogether quite prepared.

‘I saw at a glance,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, upon the termination of her laugh, ‘that you were a fat, sweet, pretty child——’

‘Oh, spare me, aunt dear!’ exclaimed Griselda, hiding her face with the palms of her hands, but peering between her open fingers with a look full of fun and glee. ‘You will make me so sorrowful for the past. Is it possible that I ever could have been pretty?’

‘As you are, were, and will be,’ responded Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘as your glass has long since informed you, and which gratifying intelligence I now confirm;’ and then the middle-aged, if not elderly, lady

laughed as in days, perhaps, when the bald spot required no lace cap to hide its abnormal deficiency.

‘You will make me most dreadfully vain, aunt dear,’ rejoined Griselda, rising from her seat, and, throwing herself upon the floor before her aunt, she embraced her with an energetic force approaching to violence, and kissed her on both cheeks with great rapidity of exchange.

Miss Penelope Peepem began to realise the fact of what being smothered with kisses meant.

‘I shall lose my breath completely if you persist in assaulting me in this way,’ expostulated she, and pretended to force herself away from the entwined arms of her niece; but the sham was too transparent to appear real even for the minutest grain of time. Miss Penelope Peepem

loved that hearty caress in a manner known only to herself.

‘Having a little more to say by way of conclusion——’

‘If really the conclusion, aunt dear,’ interrupted Griselda, re-occupying her seat, ‘I will endeavour to listen to it with the effect of resigned patience.’

‘Our family history,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘like the records, probably, of a great number of strictly private families, is not totally without singular, strange, and startling incidents ; but none more so, perhaps, than within a few weeks of your arrival from the East Indies I received a letter from the West Indies, informing me of the mournful tidings of my dear sister’s death from—as Lieutenant Slomax wrote in rather bad taste as I then thought, and still think—an attack of

Yellow Jack, which carried her off. His son, and only child, he added, was much too precious a life to be subjected any longer to the dangerous climate of Jamaica, and he had, therefore, secured a passage for him to England in a ship which might be expected to arrive soon after the delivery of his letter; knowing that I would receive the little orphan child as a mother, and be a mother to him in every respect. What could I do?’

‘That which you did,’ replied her niece. ‘Hurry to meet the little orphan child on the deck of the vessel before she anchored, clutch him in your arms, and bring him here to make him the happiest of nephews.’

‘But to become slightly tyrannical with you,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, with closed eyes and a slight shake of the head. ‘When sleeping in your cot, he, occasion-

ally, would tickle your nose with a feather!’

‘With the unselfish thought, no doubt,’ returned Griselda, ‘of adding pleasure to my dreams.’

‘And disturb your rest by reversing the feather, and trying, experimentally, how far the sharp end of the quill would go into one of your ears—an act of premeditated cruelty, which produced the first and last application of the birch at my hands, vigorously administered,’ added her aunt, with something like exultation at the reminiscence.

‘How very cruel, aunt dear!’ exclaimed Griselda. ‘I should have thought you incapable of giving the smallest pain to dear Teddy.’

‘He also used to pick out the eyes of your dolls,’ said Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘and, immediately upon his arrival from the West Indies, he treated them, as he

said, just like niggers, which treatment, as it appeared to me, was most inconsiderate and coarse in the extreme.'

'Being young and thoughtless,' said her niece, apologetically, 'and from evil associations, perhaps, not knowing right from wrong.'

'He soon improved, however, in these objectionable respects, and you became the very best of friends and inseparable companions—the two happiest children with each other that I ever saw play or quarrel.'

'Who could be otherwise than happy with dear Teddy,' said Griselda, enthusiastically, 'the best, noblest, and most clever fellow that ever lived!'

Miss Penelope Peepem was suddenly seized with a dry, short, hacking cough; but the effect was not altogether that of bronchial irritation.

‘My nephew, and your cousin Edward Slomax, as a schoolboy at Rugby,’ said she, recovering from her cough, ‘distinguished himself at cricket, football, and wrestling, but no prize fell to his lot in intellectual pursuits. The same remark, I fear, applies to his present position at the University of Cambridge.’

‘He is in the university eleven,’ observed Griselda, with a flush of pride mantling over her features.

‘But he is not to be found high up in the tripos,’ rejoined her aunt, ‘or, indeed, in the tripos at all.’

‘He is stroke in the university eight,’ returned Griselda, ‘and admitted to be as strong and finished an oarsman as Cambridge ever possessed.’

‘A fine, dear, good fellow!’ added Miss Penelope Peepem, with profound admiration at the thought of her nephew’s athletic

accomplishments. 'But,' and, closing her eyes, she shook her head gravely, and the bald spot was again in danger of being published. 'But,' she repeated, 'recollecting that his future depends upon his success at the Bar, I must come to the conclusion, opposed as it is to my feelings, that his time both at Rugby and Cambridge might have been more profitably employed. That is all I have to say upon the subject, and I wish that, truthfully, I could express myself in more pleasant words.'

'Whatever he gives his attention to,' said her niece, with a proud toss of the head, 'he succeeds in.'

'We will put our entire trust, then, my dear,' said Miss Penelope Peepem, 'and place our earnest faith in the fervent hope that he will soon see the expediency of giving up athletic sports for intellectual

pursuits, so as to qualify himself for taking a splendid position at the English Bar. I can see him now,' she added, 'in a wig and gown, eloquently pleading for justice to his clients.'

'Which sometimes means, I think,' remarked her niece, 'a successful effort to make right appear wrong, and wrong right.'

'Having proceeded so far in my review of some of the antecedents of our family,' resumed Miss Penelope Peepem, without noticing her niece's cynicism upon the professional duty of counsel, 'I will now make a few concluding observations upon your five uncles.'

'I almost wish, aunt dear, at the present moment,' responded Griselda, 'that I had not possessed quite so many.'

'It might have been better, taking all things into consideration,' rejoined her

aunt, 'had their number been less from the beginning, as much personal trouble must have been saved to themselves, at least, and probably to others. It was not, however, to be. Five was the number, neither more nor less, and, as their several positions at the termination of their lives can alone influence your future interests, my dear, I shall confine myself by giving a few particulars of their respective ends, in so far as this remarkably troublesome world is concerned. For there can be no two opinions, *I* think, concerning its being a troublesome world.'

'It seems to me to be a very pleasant one,' returned Griselda, with a slight attempt to suppress a yawn, 'and, speaking for myself alone, I wish no change or alteration in it.'

'Which admission I almost am inclined,' —the little lace cap had a shake— 'to ac-

cept as an undeserved compliment paid to myself,' rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem. 'To be as brief as possible, however, concerning the earthly ends of your five uncles——'

Griselda either jumped for joy, or was quite ready to do so, at meeting with this assurance of something like a defined limit.

'I shall merely state,' continued she, 'that in Ceylon, China, Zanzibar, South Africa, and North America their graves may be found, or might have been many long years since by, perhaps, a vigilant search being made for them. At the present moment it is doubtful if any trace remains of the positive interment of any one of your dear uncles; but considering the time which has elapsed no proof is necessary or likely to become so, as far as I am aware, that their dust or ashes repose

in these distant regions of the globe. With their children, however, most important questions arise. As your and dear Teddy's cousins they are co-heirs and co-heiresses, under their grandfather's will, to a division of the property, which is to be sold at my death and the money distributed in equal proportions to the survivors, male and female. As my man of business says, and the assertion is perfectly obvious, great difficulties must necessarily present themselves in discovering the number of the survivors, where they are, and their personal identification. He also states, with undeniable common-sense, that, after all the mortgages upon the property are paid off, principal and interest, which were created from time to time to meet the drawings of your uncles upon my dear father while he lived; the costs of applying to the Court of Chancery for

general instructions which must be made, he tells me, when I am no——' a slight choke prevented the completion of the sentence, 'and from one cause and another, needless to mention, there will be little left to be divided among the survivors, whether satisfactorily proved to be limited or unlimited.'

'I am rather glad to hear that,' replied her niece, throwing herself backwards in her chair, and resting her head upon a folded arm. Having nothing to expect, aunt dear, we cannot, under any circumstances, be disappointed.'

'I have little more to say,' rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem.

Griselda was secretly rejoiced to hear it.

'My-life interest, punctually paid quarterly by my man of business,' resumed her aunt, 'is just over a thousand

a year, and when I have paid the household expenses, and the masters and mistresses for your instruction, my dear, in the arts and sciences, together with dear Teddy's college allowance, which is under what he ought to receive so that things might be more pleasant with him, I have left just about enough to buy an inexpensive pair of gloves and nothing more.'

'How reproachfully generous of you, my dear aunt!' exclaimed Griselda, suddenly regaining an upright position in her chair. 'We must be more economical. Dismiss Signor Vesprucci, and all the rest of the professors of the arts and sciences. I shall be quite as happy without them.'

Miss Penelope Peepem entertained a corresponding opinion, but, instead of expressing, reserved it.

At this moment the door of the apart-

ment was burst open with a sudden jerk, and in bounced Sam, with his nose, eyes, ears, and chest blocked, jammed, and covered with red sand.

‘You’ve been poaching sir,’ said his young mistress, as he squatted at her feet and stared in her face as well as the sand would permit. ‘You’ve been trying, sir, and, I have no doubt, most successfully,’ continued she, raising a forefinger to admonish him, ‘to dig out a rabbit from its burrow.’

Sam offered no defence, but, still occupying his position, gave a strong and vigorous sneeze as a relief to the irritating effects of the sand in his nose.

CHAPTER IV.

SADDLED and bridled, and awaiting with feverish excitement the anticipated presence of her mistress, Gazelle stood at the ivy-twined porch of Forester's Lodge, pawing the gravel restlessly with her feet, and making herself anything but agreeable to Cock Robin, who held her in a firm grasp by the reins close to the bit. Her small, quill-tipped ears were thrown back, and the white of her full, dark eyeballs had almost a vicious effect as she continued to cut up the gravel with her fore-feet, and, occasionally, lash out with her heels.

‘Come, come,’ expostulated he, stretching out his legs at an acute angle as far as possible from the reach of her plunges, ‘can’t you let me alone just for once, just by way of a treat?’

Gazelle reared, and lifted Cock Robin bodily from the ground by way of a practical answer.

‘That’s nice behaviour, that is,’ continued he, ‘for all my care of ye! Here, on the morning of the first reg’lar meet, you stand without a stain on your skin, which looks as white as a snow-flake from head to heel, and without a puff, windgall, or scratch on a single leg, all four being as sound as a stag’s, and looking as fine as if they belonged to a stag, instead of a nasty-tempered, biting, kicking, plunging varmint of a pony. Nice behaviour, isn’t it?’

Gazelle looked at Cock Robin sideways,

and champed the bit as if trying to snap it in halves.

‘Now, I wonder, sometimes,’ said he, ‘if you mean all this, or whether it’s not all kid. I’m your best friend in or out of the stable, think what you like of Miss Grizzle, and yet you are always trying, or pretending to try, to have a mouthful of me, or kick my precious body into the middle of the next parish. Nice behaviour, isn’t it?’

Gazelle had another vigorous champ at the bit, and the white of her eyes became more visible than before, as she turned them towards Cock Robin with anything but a look of amity.

‘When you come home after a clipper,’ continued he, ‘who nicely washes ye all over with soft soap and hot water, gets ye dry as soon as plenty o’ rubbers and lots of elbow grease can do it; gives ye a

couple of quarts of warm oatmeal gruel as smooth as cream to suck in ; throws into your crib a quartern of bruised oats mixed with a handful or two of white peas ; bandages your legs all round, and then leaves ye to yourself for a while to get a little over the pumping you've had ?'

Gazelle maintained the same attitude of offence, and did not seem to be softened in the least by the appeal.

' And then back I come to take off your damp clothes and bandages, well rub your legs until they are quite dry and warm, just as if you were the first lady in the land as wanted her legs well rubbed, and which you often look as if you thought yourself. After that, what do I do ? Why, I give ye a short and sharp dressing, brush over your silky mane and flag, put on fresh and warm clothes and bandages, pitch a liberal allowance of corn into your

crib, which means as much as you can eat, rack ye up with hay as sweet as violets, litter a straw bed under ye which reaches above your hocks and knees, and then, with a friendly slap or two on your quarter by way of saying good night, we part to meet again early next morning, to see what I can do more for ye to make you feel as fresh as a kitten.'

Gazelle, at this division of his address, reared again, standing exceptionally upright on her hind legs, and Cock Robin's feet were once more lifted visibly from the ground.

'Exactly so,' said he, regaining them. 'That's just what I get for all my nussin' of ye, nothing more and seldom less; but whether it's all in earnest or all kid, *I* don't know, and, perhaps, never shall.'

Griselda now appeared by the side of Gazelle, to whom she presented, as was

her wont, a small piece of white sugar. The pony turned her long and shapely neck towards her mistress, and, accepting the palatable gift with evident satisfaction, stretched her limbs out and stood as motionless as a statue chiselled in white and speckless marble.

‘Your invitation to mount,’ observed Griselda, smiling; and placing her right hand on the cantel of the saddle, and her left on the pommel, she vaulted into her seat with a light, elastic spring which required no aid to give it additional impetus. No sooner was she mounted than, slipping her fingers quickly through the reins, Gazelle felt that she was to move, but in a very different fashion from that which she had just exhibited when Cock Robin held them close to the bit. Like all indulged beauties, she was capricious and had a will of her own; but she knew full well that,

to avoid unpleasant consequences, she must obey the firm, light hand which held her. And so Gazelle strode forward along the gravel drive leading to the road with the vanity of a peacock displaying his tail, now and again lowering her head between her knees, and tossing it aloft as high as it would reach.

‘That’s what I call a picter!’ observed Cock Robin, folding his arms across his breast, striding his legs widely apart, and watching with the most profound admiration, the receding forms of Gazelle and her rider. ‘That’s what I call a picter,’ repeated he, as he turned and quitted the spot.

Griselda, having received from Squire Oakacre the flattering title of being his ‘first whip,’ since her getting to the heads of the hounds and stopping them, on that memorable occasion when Gazelle cleared

the gate and flew to the front, resolved to please the finest old sportsman in the county, as he was acknowledged to be, by appearing at the meet this morning in a costume consistent with the distinction bestowed upon her, and which, she knew, if rather conspicuous, would, at least, be becoming in its effect.

In carrying out this design, therefore, a well-cut, close-fitting scarlet cloth jacket was procured, which, encircled at the waist by a broad, gold band, set off to advantage the wide, short, blue skirt flowing beneath it. A small, black velvet cap, as like as possible to the squire's in shape, covered her golden tresses, which were so closely braided and plaited as to be kept within confined limits, although from their profusion defying concealment. A pair of white doeskin gauntlets, and a light, single-thong hunting-whip completed Gris-

elda's livery as 'first whip' to Squire Oakacre's fox-hounds, every one of which knew her as well as he did.

Thus equipped, and Gazelle indisputably 'as fresh as a kitten,' they wended their way at a gentle pace towards Oakacre Court, the ancient seat of the Oakacres.

CHAPTER V.

THEY continued their course uninterrupted along the road without meeting or being overtaken by anyone, until arriving between the high, sloping banks of a long, sinuous lane, Griselda heard the distant clattering hoofs of a horse approaching her in the rear. Catching the sound at the same instant, Gazelle threw back one ear and so kept it until the arrival of the horse by her side, when she threw back both, and looked promptly prepared to give the stranger a reception with either her teeth or her heels.

‘Your pony won’t bite, miss, will she?’ asked the rider of the horse, in rather tremulous accents.

‘No,’ replied Griselda, glancing at the stranger, whom she saw at once was so to her. ‘You need not be afraid.’

‘She won’t kick, miss, will she?’ rejoined he, in a still more uncertain tone, as Gazelle looked quite ready to give him a taste of what she could do if disposed to lash out behind.

‘No,’ returned Griselda, who felt more than amused at the portrayed fear of the horseman. ‘She never kicks with me on her back. You need not be afraid.’

‘I’m glad to hear that,’ added he, ‘for I thought she looked a little too handy both with her teeth and her heels just now.’

‘My pony often does herself an injustice,’ responded Griselda, ‘by looking what she really is not, inclined to be

somewhat vicious when only playful.'

'I'm glad to hear that,' repeated the horseman, 'as we can now ride on comfortably together.'

Griselda darted a look of mingled surprise and anger at him, which, had he perceived, he would have come to the ready conclusion that the journey must be short for the probability of mutual comfort being insured.

'You're going to the meet, miss, I see by your dress,' he continued, curvetting his horse close to her side, slightly spurring and pulling hard at the same time, 'and a very pretty dress it is, I think, and you look very——' the remainder of the sentence must be left to the imagination, for a pair of eyes, wide open and flashing with indignation, were fixed upon the speaker, and not a syllable followed from his lips by way of a finish.

A short silence of a somewhat awkward kind followed, but the horseman, regaining some of his temporarily lost assurance, at length observed,

‘I suppose you can jump, miss?’

‘My pony can,’ was the curt reply.

‘I know nothing about hunting,’ rejoined he, ‘and am altogether a stranger in these parts; but I shan’t remain a stranger long, I expect, for I mean to do the thing handsome, and be liberal, hospitable, and charitable.’

No observation was made by his companion upon this vain-glorious announcement, but a contemptuous curl of the upper lip conclusively evinced the effect it produced.

‘I belong to a good, respectable, and responsible Middlesex family of the name of Chickabiddy——’

The speaker might have been mistaken;

but he thought he heard somebody laugh. No one and nothing, however, could be more solemn and imperturbably grave than the features of his solitary auditor. Mr. Chickabiddy felt, therefore, that he had committed an error of judgment, and resumed the thread of his personal narrative.

‘I bought an old, tumble-down place a few miles from here, called Hawkhurst, and I mean to enlarge, decorate, and furnish it, and make it fit for a merchant prince to live in.’

Griselda thought there was a kind of swell in Mr. Chickabiddy’s voice as he completed the sentence.

‘You may perhaps know Hawkhurst, miss?’ continued he.

‘I know it well,’ she replied. ‘It has not been inhabited for many years.’

‘Not a living soul under the roof for

more than a quarter of a century,' rejoined he—'nothing but the rats, and they were starved out long ago. It was plunged into Chancery before I was born, and remained there until I got it out by the sheer force of my money, when all the rightful claimants to the property had either spent theirs or gone to take possession of those freeholds which can't be mortgaged either here or elsewhere.'

Mr. Chickabiddy chuckled, as if he thought he had said something which merited a compliment; but, if deserved, he did not receive the reward, Griselda being reticent even to dumbness.

'I then stepped in,' continued he, a little chilled by his companion's manner, 'and here I am the legal proprietor of Hawkhurst, with a good marketable title.'

Having proclaimed himself to be the owner of a neighbouring property well

known to Griselda, although a deserted and mouldering ruin, from her earliest recollection, she entertained a feeling of curiosity, if not of interest, in what he was now telling her, and listened, as he saw, with attention.

‘I shall have my work cut out to make my way among the county families, I know well enough,’ resumed he, ‘but I shall come to the front with the best of ’em, and I will tell you why, miss. They are poor and proud—I am rich and proud, and money must win in the end. No one knows better than I do the power of money. *I* have known the time when I was without a shilling to call my own or anybody else’s.’

His companion made no remark, but continued to listen in silence, although now impatient for an opportunity to escape from Mr. Chickabiddy’s society.

‘Ah!’ exclaimed he, at the end of a long-drawn breath, ‘a man knows the value of money when he can remember not having a shilling, and afterwards feels that his pockets are lined with gold. That’s my case, miss, past and present. A fellow never looks so small as when he’s without cash, and doesn’t know where or how to get some. I’m not very big——’

Griselda had already seen that he was not.

‘But twice the size I’ve felt before now, when ready to go down on my knees for some money-bag to put his heel on my throat and walk over me. It matters not how sharp and clever a chap may be. If he hasn’t money, or the talent to get it by hook or by crook, he’s sure to take a back seat among the fiddlers. Education and book-learning, and all that

sort of thing, is well enough in its way, and a man may lay claim to being a gentleman because his father was one and his mother a lady, but if he's poor he'll know what snubbing means. I tell you, miss, and you may take my word for it, there's nothing in this world like money. A rogue with it has more friends and flatterers than a saint without it. In fact,' and Mr. Chickabiddy was most pronounced in his delivery, 'people now-a-days do very nearly what they did in Nebuchadnezzar's reign. They then worshipped the golden calf, and now they worship the golden ass. I beg your pardon, miss; it might have been more polite, perhaps, to have said golden donkey, but you'll excuse me, I know.'

Whether Griselda excused him or not, or whether any cause existed for excuse, did not appear, for she continued to ride

on between the high sloping banks with her lips closed, if not sealed.

‘Now there’s this Squire Oakacre, as he’s called——’

‘He’s an old and beloved friend of mine,’ interrupted Griselda, with an energy of tone and manner which seemed to almost startle Mr. Chickabiddy, ‘and of my family.’

‘I wasn’t going to say anything against him, miss, added he. ‘I was only going to repeat what I was told, that he’s none too rich, and to pay his way is about as much as he can do and scarcely that.’

Griselda felt ready to strangle him.

‘He hunts the hounds himself, I hear,’ resumed Mr. Chickabiddy, ‘because he can’t afford to pay or mount a huntsman, and yet won’t take a guinea subscription towards paying the expenses.’

‘The dear, generous, kind, good old

gentleman!' enthusiastically exclaimed his companion.

'He may be all that,' added Mr. Chickabiddy, sententiously, 'but to be short of money must be gall and wormwood to him. Why, I'm informed that he does nearly the whole of the work himself, and has but one whipper-in!'

An expression of amusement passed over Griselda's features as she remarked,

'He now claims, I believe, having a first and second whipper-in.'

'Upon small wages, I expect, if he has,' responded he. 'I treated him, however, upon my taking possession of my property,' with the repetition of the swell in his voice, 'like one gentleman should treat another gentleman. I wrote a letter to him, telling him who I was, and enclosed a cheque for fifty guineas as a subscription; but it was sent back with, I must

say, as polite a reply as one gentleman could write to another gentleman, informing me that he had always hunted his hounds at his own expense, and that he should continue to do so, as long as he lived. At the same time he expressed the hope of seeing me as regularly as I could make it convenient at the cover side, and invited me to breakfast at Oakacre Court this morning, where, as he said, I should be introduced to most of his friends who hunted with him. I think, miss, you will say this was handsome on both sides, just as one gentleman should treat another gentleman.'

His companion probably had an opinion upon this particular branch of the subject; but, whatever it might have been, it was reserved in silence, and they rode on between the high, sloping banks of the lane, Mr. Chickabiddy monopolising nearly the

whole of the conversation upon the favourite subjects of himself, his possessions, his sayings and doings.

‘The parson of the parish called,’ resumed he, ‘as soon, almost, as the baker, when it was known that I was to be found at home, and, knowing what he came for as well as he did, I told him, before he had quite done shaking me by the hand, that I would do the thing handsome, and give freely to all his local charities, societies, coal clubs, blanket clubs, missions, and anything and everything that he thought proper to mention. When I said this, miss, you should have seen his reverence smile. It really was lovely to behold !’

Gazelle, with her ears pricked forward, now began to pull and chafe upon the reins, for the end of the lane was in view, and she knew that, according to custom,

a bit of a steeple-chase would soon commence.

‘I mean to be popular, miss,’ continued Mr. Chickabiddy, ‘in this division of the county, as popular as ‘money can make me, and nothing makes a chap so popular as giving his money away. Like most people in being generous,’ said he, with a loud chuckle, ‘I mean to give it away to please myself.’

‘You know the road, I suppose, to Oakacre Court?’ observed his companion. ‘It is to the left at the end of this lane.’

‘But ain’t you going there, miss?’ inquired he, with some surprise.

Gazelle was now steadied by an experienced hand.

‘Yes,’ replied her rider, ‘but I am going straight;’ and, before Mr. Chickabiddy could recover from his profound astonish-

ment, she was in the air and over a thickly-bushed hurdle without touching a twig, in a direct line for Oakacre Court.

CHAPTER VI.

INCLUDING Sam, who had taken possession of the large arm-chair at the bottom of the table without being invited, and was casting a sly look around for any stray bits which might be considerately thrown for him to catch with his acquired dexterity, the small party at breakfast in the cosy room of Forester's Lodge one morning seemed to be on the very best terms with each other, the big world without, and the little world within.

The small party, including Sam, consisted of four. Miss Penelope Peepem,

with a burnished copper urn of boiling water hissing and steaming in front of her, was flanked on the right within arm's length by her nephew, Edward Slomax, and on the left by her niece Griselda, with, as before has been described, Sam at the measurable distance of the length of the table, impatiently waiting for what he could get.

Edward Slomax had just finally quitted Cambridge with what seemed to be, from his present energetic occupation, a healthy university appetite, for mutton chop after mutton chop disappeared, to the admiration, mingled with silent surprise, of both his sister and aunt, but decidedly not Sam's. The sentiments, indeed, of Sam upon the progress of events were a blend of selfish envy and supreme jealousy, expressed now and then by a suppressed inward growl, particularly when, from his

coign of vantage, he perceived a tempting tit-bit of brown fat vanishing for ever from his sight.

‘Giant,’ said Miss Penelope Peepem, with a smile which was quite natural, as she poised upon a fork a mutton chop of no contemptible size and weight, ‘let me have the pleasure of again helping you.’

The giant, however, admitted that his personal happiness in receiving more would not approach within measurable distance that of his aunt in giving more, and announced in plain English that ‘having done, and done well, it was not his intention to attempt the smallest improvement upon the satisfactory result.’

If not exactly ‘a giant,’ as Miss Penelope Peepem had somewhat poetically designated her nephew, Edward Slomax might lay claim to being on the big side of humanity. By the exact length of a

barleycorn, if there had been no mistake in the latest measurement, he stood just over six feet in his socks, with a broad and deep chest, and a pair of shoulders in symmetrical width to correspond. A well-formed head, with plenty of room for brains, was set on a muscular throat, open to view from the loose shirt-collar which encircled it, and, surveyed from the short, crisp hair, looking more as if it had been recently mown than cut, to the rather diminutive feet for his size, he had all the appearance of possessing that strength and agility for which he had rendered himself famous as an athlete. With features inclined to be ruddy, and somewhat large dark-grey eyes, which looked as if a smile had been settled in them as soon as they could see, there sat Miss Penelope Peepem's nephew, as fine a physical specimen of a young English gentleman as

could be found, perhaps by diligent seeking, within the territorial boundary of the county of Hampshire.

Cutting a crust from what looked an exceedingly crusty loaf, he cried, 'Play!'

Sam was on the look-out.

Bang went the crust. Sam caught it most dexterously, but sneezed, as if his nose had suffered in the attempt.

'Well done!' exclaimed the giant, preparing a second ball of about the same size. 'Look out!'

Sam looked out.

Bang went the crust. Sam ducked, and the ball flew harmlessly over his head as he again sneezed, clearly signifying to all whom it might concern, 'No more of that for me. It comes too straight and fast.'

'Oh, you clever darling!' ejaculated Griselda, as she rushed from her chair

and embraced Sam with the utmost warmth. 'Was it not brilliant talent, Teddy, to duck his twopenny?'

'His what?' cried her aunt, fixing a look of combined surprise and indignation upon her niece—'his what?'

'Twopenny,' replied Griselda, stroking Sam's sleek, pendulant ears, and kissing him between his full black eyes as fondly almost as he could desire in his most jealous mood.

'Miss Griselda Peepem,' rejoined her aunt, with the essence of seriousness in her whole deportment, 'the time has arrived——'

'May it never return!' interrupted her niece, vehemently. 'May it never return!' repeated she.

'For such an objectionable expression never to escape your lips again,' continued Miss Penelope Peepem, with the gravity

of a judge passing the extreme sentence of the law. 'I cannot conceive anything more highly indecorous than a young lady on the very eve of entering the best county society making use of any vulgar term, more especially such an objectionable one as twopenny.'

'I meant merely Sam's head, aunt dear,' returned Griselda, resuming her seat, with the corner of her upper lip slightly curled. 'I'm always wrong in whatever I say or do.'

'Not always,' added her aunt, with partly-closed eyelids, and a slight shake of the head. 'But there are limits to expressions, and twopenny seems to me greatly to exceed them. What do you say, giant?'

The giant, having a strong tendency to agree with his fair and pretty cousin upon all occasions, was not disposed to make

this a conspicuous exception, and rejoined that, twopenny being a figurative synonym, he thought it was about as good as most of its kind.

Miss Penelope Peepem, finding herself in the minority, both felt and looked so.

By way of an expedient to render surrounding things pleasant again, he broke the awkward pause which now prevailed by observing,

‘What fun we had last Saturday—Degree-day! The undergrads were more stormy than ever I knew them before—nothing but thunder and lightning.’

‘Tell me all about it, Teddy,’ said Griselda. ‘I like to hear nothing better than your college shindies.’

Miss Penelope Peepem shut her eyes completely, and a deep sigh rose from somewhere to audibly take its departure nobody knows where.

‘Well,’ commenced Teddy, ‘last Saturday being Degree-day, there in the Senate House, as usual, were the fathers and mothers, cousins, aunts, sisters, lovers, and loveresses, proctors, bull-dogs——’

‘What!’ ejaculated Miss Penelope Peepem—‘bull-dogs?’

‘In their brown cloth capes and brass buttons,’ continued he, by way of an illustrated explanation, ‘awaiting the advent of the old vice to take his seat with his pompous, solemn drop into the big arm-chair.’

‘There was not a pin point upwards in the cushion, I sincerely trust?’ remarked Griselda, with her hands raised in the form of supplication.

This was rather too much for Miss Penelope Peepem to maintain a rigid gravity of demeanour, and her sides began

to shake convulsively, and her chin to quiver beyond control.

‘As far as I know,’ responded he, laughing, ‘I should say not, as I failed to perceive any spasmodic effect.’

Miss Penelope Peepem turned her head slightly on one side, and lifted a hand to conceal a supposed blush.

‘As soon as the old vice was seen,’ continued he, ‘we in the gallery all joined in chorus,

“Slap bang, here we are again,

Here we are again, here we are again,”

until I began to think that the very roof of the Senate House would fly off.’

‘I wish I’d been there,’ observed Griselda. ‘There should have been one voice above the rest.’

Miss Penelope Peepem became serious on the instant.

‘As the old vice dropped into his chair, with his dignified and gracious condescension to sit when everybody else was standing,’ resumed he, ‘we all sang together,

“I love it, I love it, and who shall dare,
To chide me for loving this old arm-chair.”’

‘I should have led the chorus,’ said Griselda, ‘had I been present. Nothing would have stopped me.’

‘I am gratefully thankful to think that you were not present,’ remarked her aunt, curtly. ‘There might have been a scene in the Senate House, never before witnessed in the ancient history of the University.’

‘A novelty, therefore, replete with interest,’ responded her niece. ‘What a lost opportunity!’

‘We, of course, whistled all the popular melodies,’ continued the giant, ‘and cheered everybody, theological, political, and

social. I came in with "Well rowed, well runned," and, from the Senior Wrangler down to the Wooden Spoon, all came in for a full share of the lusty honours we roared upon them.'

'I have frequently heard of the Wooden Spoon,' said Miss Penelope Peepem, with a dubious smile, 'but surely there is no such culinary, academical honour.'

'Oh, yes, there is!' replied he. 'The undergrads let down by a string from the gallery a large spoon made of wood, which the last man of the Tripos—always a jolly good fellow—seizes and shoulders, and carries off amidst hurrahs enough to deafen ye. No one is more popular than the Wooden Spoon.'

'I wish,' said his aunt, with a look of very soft reproach, 'that you, Teddy, had been the Wooden Spoon.'

'I don't,' sharply rejoined Griselda. 'I

couldn't bear his being a spoon of any kind.'

'The last man of the Tripos,' returned Miss Penelope Peepem, mildly, 'would have been an improved position upon not being in it at all.'

'Mathematical Tripos honours,' said the giant, 'and University physical distinctions too often clash. They don't agree. Feel that!' and, as he spoke, he bent his elbow upwards at an acute angle, and invited his aunt to place her fingers upon the developed, large knot of muscles which might have compared favourably with those of a Roman gladiator of old. 'Feel that,' repeated he.

'I really much prefer not doing so,' responded Miss Penelope Peepem. 'It appears to me indelicate.'

'Oh,' exclaimed her niece, 'they are

only his biceps! Feel his biceps, aunt dear.'

Overcoming her reluctance and yielding to persuasion, Miss Penelope Peepem slightly touched that part of her nephew's arm presented to her, and simpered that it was 'unimpressible.'

'Hard as cast steel,' said he; 'all done through training for the boat-race which we won by three lengths, and might have made it thirty.'

'Gratifying as the result was,' returned his aunt, 'I should have much preferred the Wooden Spoon as being a triumph of intellect.'

'It would not have pleased me half so well,' rejoined Griselda. 'Stroke in the winning 'Varsity eight beats all the Wooden Spoons out of sight.'

'Varsity eight!' ejaculated Miss Pene-

lope Peepem, displaying every outward effect of inward and irrepressible astonishment. 'Did I hear you say 'Varsity eight?'

The giant, as was his wont, came to the rescue.

'An abbreviation for University,' said he, scarcely, however, able to smother a laugh. 'Nothing more, most lovable of aunts.'

'A term, perhaps, commonly used by bargemen and boatmen,' added Miss Penelope Peepem, with all the starch at her command in manner and parts of speech, 'but foreign I hope, generally, to the lips of young ladies about entering the best circles of county society.'

Griselda, with a shake of her auburn curls, threw herself back in her chair, resting in a most easy but still graceful posture, greatly admired in secret by the giant, but by no means a secret to Gris-

elda ; for she guessed something long ago, and had she guessed twice she might, possibly, have been much further from guessing right.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ancient pile of baronial buildings known far and wide within the county as 'Oakacre Court,' was not, as may reasonably be surmised, an edifice of yesterday's construction, but one erected prior to the sinking upon the quicksands of Time a very long list and succession of yesterdays.

The Oakacre family had been born beneath its roof long before any record of the first of the name had been kept, or, if kept, no tittle of evidence remained of its ever having been. The monuments in the

adjacent Norman church of successive generations having been buried there, offered presumptive proof that the dust of the first of the Oakacres might be there or thereabouts, but no inscription, worn and almost obliterated as it was on many, seemed to offer the faintest trace that the dust of the original proprietor of the name crumbled beneath. From father to son they had come and gone, if the abbreviated history on their respective tombs might be trusted as revealing the simple truth, and nothing appears to have checked, interrupted, or prevented the order of succession for more centuries than, in justice to the past, ought to be enumerated in haste, as an error in one or two might easily have been committed. As far, however, as could be learnt from what remained to be read, either legibly or illegibly, no flattering special tribute had been paid to

the memory of any particular member or members of the Oakacres. Their good deeds, perhaps, had not been sufficiently numerous or conspicuous to be blown far and wide by the trumpet of Fame, or, if blown, her breath had been expended before the accomplishment of the object. They came and departed with the utmost regularity, and but little apparent variation broke the monotony of their daily or yearly lives. The landed property, and they possessed but little else, came into possession of the eldest son upon the death of his father, and except that one Oakacre lived, perhaps, a little longer or shorter than the other Oakacre, the changes, like the gnarled and knotted trees around, from which it would seem the 'old family' derived or borrowed its name, were few and slow in the extreme. For any effect, however, to the contrary, the 'old family'

might have stood still while time went on, and perhaps had.

John Oakacre, commonly called and known as 'Squire Oakacre,' the last of a long race of a popular county family, continued to dispense the hospitalities of his house as his forefathers had done before him, and with no niggard hand.

Without inquiring too carefully into the difference between expenditure and income, or seeking to learn, in a commercial spirit, what balance there might be on the deficit side of the annual account, the squire kept his hounds at his own cost, entertained his friends and neighbours at good, substantial hunt breakfasts and dinners, drank his bottle of old port daily without the slightest perceptible detriment to his health, subscribed to all the local institutions and charities, went to church regularly once every Sunday, and did his

utmost to keep awake during the sermon, sometimes with only partial success, and sometimes with a complete triumph over indisputable temptation.

Having been asked by a too curious questioner, perhaps, upon this particularly personal matter 'how old he was,' the prompt answer given, accompanied by a hearty laugh, was, 'Old enough to know better,' leaving the subject, as a matter of course, in the opaque darkness in which it had been introduced.

As a matter of fact, however, it was generally understood by those who knew how to count through the agency of their fingers that the squire had advanced to the shady side of sixty, and, although he danced with the vigour of youth at the hunt ball, was first in the foremost flight in the best run of the season, and with the strongest fox that was ever pulled down

in that county, wide as it was, he could not have honestly asserted that he remained on the sunny side of that epoch of his life. Possessing a light, wiry figure, through constant exercise from his youth upwards, John Oakacre both looked and felt younger than he was in years, albeit the hair upon his brow had lost the nut-brown shade of earlier days, and looked little less bleached than the snow-white cravat, tied with scrupulous care beneath his chin, giving an effect, through the assistance of starch, of blended stiffness and dandyism of the Beau Brummel period. His nose—John Oldacre felt proud of his nose—was decidedly aquiline, if not possessed of a half-Roman bridge, and as the portraits of his ancestors hanging in long rows in the galleries, corridors, and rooms of Oakacre Court in powdered peri-wigs and trunk hose, to say nothing of

other multifarious costumes of grotesque and quaint design, had, if nature had been copied truthfully, olfactory organs of exactly similar shape, the squire thought, and sometimes said, that it was a mark of his pedigree being right.

With features painted red by the artist hand of health, and eyes of Saxon blue, or what is supposed to be the correct definition of that colour, there sat the squire in a straight-backed, carved oak chair at the head of his table, surrounded by his guests who had responded to his invitation of being present at the first hunt breakfast of the season. The sallies of wit might not have been great, and the jokes and stories recounted anything but remarkable for originality or interest, but still there was a great deal of laughter, which fully compensated those who told them, perhaps, for the want of both. All,

at any rate, could not apparently be on better terms with each other, the squire taking the lead in the fun and keeping it; for if anyone in the whole county loved to laugh with the concentrated force of his whole heart more than another, it was John Oakacre of Oakacre Court.

‘Come,’ said he, after removing a silver tankard with two handles from his lips, his rubicund visage slightly heightened from a temporary suspension of air to the lungs, ‘come,’ repeated he, ‘it’s time to be off. My first whip will take the liberty of rating me, I know, if I’m not punctual at the meet, which, conveniently for some of us, is just outside the door. Come, gentlemen,’ continued he, ‘take your stirrup cups or jumping balls, and we’ll be off and try for a fox in the Home Wood.’

‘A sure find,’ remarked a yeoman of the heavy kind, attired in brown top-boots

as dark as Spanish mahogany, white cords, and a green, cutaway coat fastened by a single button across the breast. 'A sure find,' said he, with an air of confidence which dispelled the possibility of the shadow of a doubt being entertained in his mind that the Home Wood would be drawn blank.

'Perhaps,' observed somebody, with a chuckle, 'you've taken care, Tom Brown, to shake down a bagman.'

'A what?' shouted Tom Brown, in a voice of the most detonating, nitro-glycerine force, 'a what?' repeated he, glancing round to discover the offender, but without immediate success. 'The Home Wood,' he continued, 'is in my occupation, and always holds a litter of nateral-born cubs, season after season, as it has done long before my great-grandfather was born. Did *you* say bagman, sir?' and he turned

upon a solitary individual, almost savagely, happening to stand nearest to him, looking anything but aggressive.

It was Mr. Chickabiddy, dressed, for the first time in his life, in a new scarlet coat, doeskin breeches of the most fashionable West-End cut, patent leather military boots, with large, shining brass spurs screwed into their heels, a light, blue-satin cravat with a glittering horse-shoe pin in brilliants, fixed conspicuously in front, and a pair of tightly-fitting white kid gloves, gave a finish to a hunting costume of his own selection and characteristic taste, which, to be seen once, was sure to be remembered.

To complete Mr. Chickabiddy's photograph as he stood with an expression of startled astonishment at the abrupt question put to him by Tom Brown, it may be a fitting opportunity to mention that his

nose turned up, his complexion wore the bilious hue of a sweed-turnip, except where a crop of inflammable spots, both large and small, intervened, his eyes were small, black, fiery, and ferretty, and, his hair being a thing of the past, his head looked little less smooth and polished than a billiard ball.

Such was the outward and visible effect of the outward and visible man of Orlando Chickabiddy, the new occupant and proprietor of Hawkhurst, as he stood in a confused state of absolute bewilderment beneath the angry, uncompromising glance of Tom Brown.

‘Did *you* say bagman, sir?’ repeated he, swaying his head to and fro.

At the end of a short cough, as the means, perhaps, to clear his voice or afford time to regain his self-possession, Mr. Chickabiddy replied with great calmness

of manner, if slightly disturbed in spirit,

‘No, sir, I did not mention the word bagman. I was once a——’

Mr. Chickabiddy was as near as possible admitting that, once upon a time, he had been ‘a bagman,’ but managed to swallow the humiliating confession before it escaped his lips.

‘Do you know, sir, who I am?’ continued he, breaking off at a tangent, and drawing himself up to his full height, rather above than below five feet four inches, ‘do you know, sir, who I am?’ repeated he.

‘No, I don’t,’ replied Tom Brown, still swaying his head to and fro, like the pendulum of a clock in motion. ‘But I should say, from the look of ye, that you’re a furriner.’

‘A foreigner!’ exclaimed Orlando Chickabiddy, with more reserved indignation

than he could have possibly expressed in tone or manner. 'Let me tell you, sir, that I'm a free-born Englishman,' and his little pigeon-breast seemed to swell with pride as he delivered the patriotic words. 'I belong, sir, to an old, responsible, and respectable Middlesex family, and I am the owner of Hawkhurst.'

At the conclusion of the sentence it must be admitted that Tom Brown evidently winced, for he had heard through common report that the owner of Hawkhurst was not only rich beyond all ordinary calculation, but was positively the sole proprietor of a gold mine. Tom Brown felt on the instant that he had committed a blunder, and looked so.

This effect did not fail to be observed by Mr. Chickabiddy, who, with a clank of the brass spurs, strode towards where Tom Brown was standing, and, with their

faces scarcely separated by the respective points of their noses, he again asked at the pitch of his voice, which sounded not dissimilar to a shriek,

‘Do you know, sir, who *I* am?’

The squire at this moment interposed with the friendly assurance that a mistake—unintentionally, but still a mistake—had been made by Tom Brown, and that as no one could seriously suspect him of turning down a bagged fox in the Home Wood, which was always, as alleged, a sure find, neither could anyone suppose that his new neighbour and friend, Mr. Chickabiddy, capable of using the expression of bagman in an offensive sense.

‘The word never escaped my lips,’ pleaded Mr. Chickabiddy. ‘I did not utter it, sir, upon my sacred word of honour.’

‘Somebody else did, then,’ rejoined Tom

Brown. 'I heard it with my own ears. But as it wasn't you, Mr. Chickabiddy, you needn't beg my pardon. Forgive and forget, I say, all the world over. Let's take a glass of cherry-brandy together. It may sweeten our thoughts, and make us on better terms with each other, sir.'

'A truly desirable finish to a slight error of speech,' observed Squire Oakacre, leading the way from the breakfast-room, closely followed by his spurred and boot-ed guests gaily dressed in scarlet and green.

Upon emerging from the old, time-worn porch of Oakacre Court, wherein the martins had built their nests year after year, with undisputed and undisturbed possession, a group might have been seen upon the expansive lawn in front—surrounded by tall elms upon the topmost

branches of which a colony of rooks cawed and surveyed with apparent interest everything that was going on below—composed of horses and hounds, and, in her picturesque dress of first whip, Griselda herself the most conspicuous figure of all.

Mounted on Gazelle, the pony stood motionless in the midst of the hounds, with Cock Robin in his 'new moult' at her head, and, as she permitted him to pass a hand repeatedly down her arched and smooth neck without even a single attempt to snap it off, it may fairly be conjectured that a truce to hostilities had been temporarily carried out between them in a practical and satisfactory form.

Edward Slomax, otherwise 'the giant,' rested in a careless attitude with one arm thrown over the pommel of the saddle, and acting, it may be presumed, as a kind of self-constituted body-guard, with a stout

ash-plant in his grasp, and which he looked quite capable of using upon any case of urgency or emergency.

Such was the situation upon the squire and his friends presenting themselves to view upon the outside of the old, time-worn porch of Oakacre Court.

No sooner, however, did the hounds catch a glimpse of him who carried the sheathed horn than, throwing their tongues in a musical chorus, they rushed and raced towards him with a loud cry of welcome.

‘Gently,’ halloed the squire, in a pleased and good-humoured voice, with a soft crack of his thong which would scarcely have brushed a fly from their flanks. ‘Gently,’ repeated he, as they stood in a circle about him with ears thrown back and waving sterns; and then, mounting an old-fashioned looking horse, with a long, thin neck, and closely-cut, short tail, he rode forward to greet

with a cheery voice and a hearty shake of the hand, his most attractive-looking 'first whip.'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Home Wood, as may be inferred from its title, was a cover at no great distance from the demesne of Oakacre Court, and upon approaching its dark outline the squire was seen to stoop from his saddle and say something in strict confidence to his 'first whip' who, contrary to strict discipline, was riding close by his side instead of slightly in advance of the huntsmen.

No sooner was the whispered communication made than Gazelle jumped into her stride, and away went the first whip in a direct line for the Home Wood. All eyes

were fixed in admiration upon the two as they approached a line of hurdles stretched before them, and, as the pony rose at the leap and carried her mistress over it with graceful ease, the squire cried out 'Well done!' and 'Well done!' was repeated by every sportsman present until it was echoed and re-echoed, and carried down the wind far away. It was music of the sweetest kind to Griselda's ears, and a flush of gratified pride spread itself over her features, and flashed in her eyes, as she kept her onward course, turning neither to the left nor the right.

'She won't take that double ditch and rail,' said the squire, in a nervous tone and manner, as he continued to watch the two now within a few lengths of the obstacle referred to. 'She won't take that,' continued he, shading his eyes in order to get a clearer view.

Scarcely, however, were the words spoken than Gazelle was seen to gather herself together as if for a grand effort, and the next moment she was in the air and over the barrier as if in possession of wings to fly across it.

‘Thank God!’ exclaimed the squire, fervently. ‘She’s landed safely: but not one man in a hundred would have taken that leap with hounds running hard from scent to view.’

‘I know where I should have been,’ observed Mr. Chickabiddy, with a chuckle.

‘So do I,’ quickly responded the squire, ‘or you possess a better seat, sir, and finer nerve than most of us here, including myself, with the best horse in my stable.’

‘I never saw her ride bolder or better!’ remarked Edward Slomax, keeping pace on foot with the squire’s hunter, assisted by the stout ash-plant. ‘She must be

cautioned, however, not to repeat such an experiment. The least mistake and she would have been flung into the next parish.'

'Ha,' exclaimed the squire, with his eyes still bent upon the receding forms of Gazelle and her rider, 'my first whip has head, hands, courage, and beauty!'

He little thought of the fatal effect of those few words upon one enraptured listener. The giant heard, and, if not already conquered, he was now completely vanquished, and a fast and bound prisoner beyond all possibility of escape. The destiny of the chequered life of Edward Slomax was fixed beyond recall at that precise moment of the world's sad history—the Nemesis which never forsook him.

At a hand gallop Griselda disappeared round the nearest corner of the Home

Wood, and the squire, gently trotting forward, soon brought his hounds within a short distance of the verge of the cover where, as was his wont, he kept them impatiently waiting for the well-known signal to throw them in for the find.

With a single wave of his whip-hand and a cheery 'Hoik in,' the whole pack, each independent of the other, crashed through and over the thick hawthorn fence into the wood, followed by the squire, whose old-fashioned horse with the short bob-tail crept leisurely through a convenient gap close by, and carried his master forward with as much ease as possible to himself and the saving of all unnecessary exertion; for he knew what a strong fox and a long run meant, and acted accordingly on the suspicion, perhaps, that this kind of work might be required of him to-day.

A faint whimper was now heard in the

middle of the cover, followed by two or three hounds throwing their tongues in a louder and more decided tone.

‘Puppy-like,’ said the squire, as if communing with himself, and at the same time taking his horn from its sheath. ‘It’s only a drag, I know ; but we may soon have the challenge.’

Scarcely were the words from his lips when a favourite hound called Rasselas, a famous old line hunter seldom known to commit an error of the most trifling kind, threw his tongue, and the first note heard was taken up by a roar which seemed to burst like thunder through the Home Wood from end to end.

‘That’s it ; have at him !’ hallooed the squire. ‘Have at him. Hoik, hoik ! Hoik together, hoik !’

The hounds in a close body were now pressing their challenged fox to the far-

the end of the cover, making the welkin ring with their music.

As a rival to their melody, however, a clear, ringing 'Gone awa-a-ay!' was now heard from the position the first whip might be supposed to have stationed herself under the express directions of the M.F.H., Squire Oakacre.

In a moment, or some such limited space, he spurred his old-fashioned horse to the edge of the cover, and driving him through the boundary fence without the option of a gap or choice of egress, sent him along at his best pace towards the spot from whence came the welcome, heart-stirring 'Gone away.'

'She's as true as Rasselas,' said the squire to himself, applying the rowels of his spurs rather too freely, as his old-fashioned horse naturally thought. 'I can depend upon one as well as the other.'

To be always with hounds, both at the find and the finish, was the fixed, unalterable determination of Squire Oakacre, his theory being that their huntsman should be in that forward and defined place, and he carried it out strictly in practice at all personal risk and any hazard. The old-fashioned horse knew this, and, knowing it from long experience, stretched himself out and essayed his best pace towards where Griselda sat on her pony, with her black velvet cap raised high above her head and her auburn hair exposed to view, shining like gold in the bright sunlight.

There was no necessity or time for questions or answers, however terse, as the leading hounds burst from a corner of the wood, and raced forward with a burning scent—heads up and sterns down.

‘Hold hard!’ cried the squire. ‘Let them get at him.’

The field of horsemen willingly obeyed the mandate, not one attempting to get too well away and over-ride the hounds; but Gazelle, impatient for the lead, taxed her rider’s skill and strength to the utmost to keep her in her place.

There might be a straggler or two.

Twang, twang, twang, went the squire’s horn.

‘Now, gentlemen,’ said he, standing in his stirrups and leaning slightly forward over the pommel of his saddle, ‘ride over them if ye can.’

The scent being breast high, the hounds flew across the first field, a wide open fallow, and, notwithstanding the dust rose in a cloud as they rattled along at full swing, there was no check to the pace from its failing for a single moment. On

they raced like greyhounds from the slips.

‘Ride over them if ye can, gentlemen,’ repeated the squire, exultingly. ‘It will take a fast horse and a bold rider to be with them to-day.’

‘He is the biggest fox that I ever viewed in my life,’ said Griselda, joining the squire, as she rode at a stretch gallop by his side.

‘We have got well away with them,’ replied he; ‘but it will be a fast and, perhaps, long run. Be careful.’

‘I mean to keep my place,’ rejoined the ‘first whip,’ ‘let it be fast or long.’

‘If about the first at the finish, as I hope to see you,’ returned he, ‘you must not take too much of the steel out of your pony now. Pull her back a little and steady her.’

‘I mean to keep my place,’ added she, with a resolve not to be doubted, ‘if

Gazelle can carry me. Nobody shall be in front of us.'

Here the short discussion ended, for the squire both heard and saw that it would be useless to continue it. Right or wrong, Griselda was determined to have her own way, and, from experience of the past, he knew it.

As straight as an arrow could fly from a bow-string, Gazelle's head was kept in a line with the next strong fence, a high, straggling bullfinch, through which the hounds crashed in full cry.

'If your pretty face ain't scored a bit I shall be mistaken,' observed a somewhat remarkable-looking individual in a long skirted coat which had once been scarlet, a velvet cap which had once been black, and top-boots and breeches which looked none the better for the wear and tear of three successive seasons. 'If your pretty

face ain't scored a bit I shall be mistaken,' repeated he, watching the near approach of Griselda to the bullfinch; but whether 'scored' or not, she was through it, and the temporarily separated boughs and twigs came together again with a sharp spring, leaving but little trace of the lead she had given the field.

'She may call me old grumblesome,' continued he, in a most unquestionable surly tone, 'or what she likes to call me. *I* don't care; but instead of being the squire's first whip, as he chooses to call her, supposing she was his second, as I am now, I suppose. In that case, she'd have to boil, feed, exercise, keep the kennels clean, and with broom, shovel, and fork make herself what she isn't—generally useful, without much time to spare for making herself particularly ornamental, and that wouldn't suit the first whip. And

yet,' said he, with a grim smile taking the place of the hitherto intensely sulky expression, 'she's a nice young lady, after all that can be said against her, and, if a little too full of the devil, it isn't her fault, p'raps. Let me take a Christian-like view of the first whip. There she goes close to hounds, leading the whole field. Come up, old 'oss!' and as he concluded the sentence he gave the animal he bestrode a practical reminder that he was not to try to pitch upon his head twice without an effort to keep upon his legs once.

Ambling and stumbling at an easy pace towards an open gateway, 'old Grumble-some,' after a short interval of reticence, resumed the thread of his audible thoughts.

'Everybody, rich and poor, has a kind word for her except me; and why don't I? I say, you old beggar, Bill Baxter—that's me—why haven't you a soft word

ready for our first whip, instead of always a rough and rusty one? It's because, you crotchety, bad-tempered, cantankerous old varmint, are jealous of her. That's what it is, Bill Baxter; you're jealous of her knowing as much, and p'r'aps more, about hounds and hunting than yourself. Come up, old 'oss;' and again the double thong was applied upon the repetition of a stumble of a too decided kind to pass unnoticed. 'I can't be in the run, if I would,' continued he, 'on this worn-out, stumped up, rickety old sheep's hurdle; and, if better mounted, I wouldn't, if I could. Why should I want to jam myself close to hounds for? Master would ask, p'r'aps, if I knew my place; the first whip might like to see me head foremost in the deepest ditch in the county, and nearly everybody behind me wishing my precious neck broken long before the kill took

place. I'm not wanted to turn hounds. Master has only to give 'em a chink-wink on his horn, and away they fly to him like mad. Come up, old 'oss;' and again the whip reminded the old 'sheep's hurdle' that he had much better stand up than fall down.

'Hark!' cried he, raising a hand to an ear, to catch the faint, distant sound. 'He's doubling back on his line—p'r'aps headed. Come up, old 'oss;' and, with an united effort, the two went forward at the combined pace of a shamble, stumble, trot, limp, canter, and gallop. 'We shall see a bit o' this run,' said he, 'without much hard riding;' and the second whip grinned a grim smile as he spoke. 'Without much hard riding,' repeated he. 'For if some folks don't care about breaking their precious necks, I do mine. Come up, old 'oss!'

Hounds in full cry were now heard more distinctly, and, as the second whipper-in anticipated, the fox was evidently doubling back towards the Home Wood, wherein he had been found.

‘We shall have a view o’ the varmint presently,’ said he, reining in the ‘old sheep’s hurdle,’ as they came to a high bank, over which the second whipper-in craned, standing as high as he could in his stirrups. ‘We shall view the hunted fox presently,’ said he, ‘or I’m much mistaken in what I hear.’

Nothing could be more in accordance with his expressed belief; for he had scarcely spoken, when the fox, with his tongue hanging from his jaws, was seen running almost in a straight line towards him, at about a hundred yards from where he stood craning over the high and steep bank.

‘They’ve given you a dustin’,’ said he, ‘and in a very few minutes too. If you don’t mend your pace pretty soon, they’ll run ye from scent to view before your draggled brush gets to the Home Wood. Now then, first whip, here you come, as usual, first in the first flight. Hie over, that’s it! Bang she goes; nothing stops her. Master always with hounds; close to their sterns, no matter what country it is, open or close, high fences, low fences, or no fences. Here they come, good riders, bad riders, and no riders. I’m among the no riders. I *can* ride, but I won’t; never would, and never will. Keep in front, some say. Keep behind, *I* say. That’s the place for a second whip; and I always keep my place. That’s what Bill Baxter says to himself; and, if he doesn’t wait for an answer, it’s because there’s nobody near, as far

as he knows, to give him one. Come up, old 'oss.'

The 'sheep's hurdle' responded to the call made upon his reserved powers, and from standing still broke into a lively canter.

'Yes,' continued he, 'there you go with your red rag out, and bellows to mend, doubling on your line for where they found ye. A fool—an out-an'-out fool—would now give a tally-ho because he views the hunted fox within fifty yards of him; but I, Bill Baxter—that's me—know better. Let them alone, I say, and so says master, when you can't help them to do better. Now, when hounds are racing their fox down as they began at the burst, how the devil and all his saints can a d—d stupid tally-ho do any good. Let them alone, I say—that's me—Bill Baxter. Come up, old 'oss.'

Together, as if coupled, Squire Oak-acre's old-fashioned horse and Gazelle rose at the yawning fence, separating them from a large, open grass field in which the pack now swept along almost in view of the sinking fox, and both 'landed' at the same moment. In the succeeding one they were again in their striding gallop, neck and neck, head to head.

'Lord, how that savage bitch of a pony can jump!' exclaimed the second whip. 'She leaps like a stag, and goes as straight as a crow flies. Come up, old 'oss.'

Extensive and thick as the Home Wood was, the hounds rushed through it, making the thorns and bushes crack and snap again as they pushed the fox along without let, check, or stop.

'Short to the left,' said the squire to his first whip, as they still rode side by side. 'Hold hard,' added he, turning

round sharply in his saddle as the cry of the hounds was now a little behind them. 'We are a little too for'ard and may head him.'

With her face flushed from chin to brow, and her eyes flashing with excitement, Griselda brought her pony to a stand-still within less than a hundred yards from the end of the cover from which she had viewed the fox away at the find.

'He'll break away again,' whispered she to the squire, 'from the same corner.'

The huntsman, absorbed at the critical moment of the sport—for he feared that the fox could not live to be pulled down in the open—still continued to listen with a hand raised as if to enjoin silence, and even the feverish champing of Gazelle's bit produced the angry knitting of his brow.

Pressed at a pace which the scent breast-high ensured, the fox, as the 'first

whip' anticipated, again broke from the extreme end of the wood, and a clear, musical, ringing 'Tally-ho' burst from her lips as she lifted her cap from her somewhat dishevelled hair now streaming in the wind.

Squire Oakacre smiled at the enthusiasm of his 'first whip,' and with a 'hold hard, let them get at him,' a bunch of leading hounds swept from the cover, and settled on the line of the fox bristling for blood.

Gazelle reared and stood almost upright on her hind legs as a steady pull upon the bridle rein effectually stopped a plunge forward to take the lead of the pack itself if permitted to have her will.

'His point is the Granby pits,' said the squire, 'but he'll not live to reach them. It will soon be from scent to view at this pace, and a kill in the open as it should be.'

The squire and his 'first whip,' getting well away, took a strong lead of the field, which straggled in a long line behind with two or three horses carrying empty saddles, and taking an independent course of their own.

'I fear Chickabiddy has had a fall,' observed the squire, pointing with his whip to a riderless horse. 'I think that's the animal he rode.'

'Yes,' replied Griselda, with a subdued laugh of the inward kind, 'and quite as much like a giraffe in shape and make as a horse.'

'He certainly lacks the form of a perfect hunter,' rejoined the squire, good humouredly, 'but let's hope that his first day's fox-hunting may not prove his last.'

'I should be really sorry if his neck were broken,' returned she. 'I have often heard of broken necks, but never saw one,

I'm happy to say. They must look, as indeed they are, so far beyond the reach of mending.'

Having skimmed over a high grass bank, looking like a flock of pigeons as they rose, the hounds rattled along over an open common interspersed with stunted and dwarfed gorse bushes, but too thinly grown for the fox to gain a moment's breath by hiding himself in. The Granby pits were in front, and these strong earths could alone save his life—not one of his loud-tongued pursuers being better informed upon the vital subject than himself.

'Ha !' ejaculated old Grumblesome, blundering on as usual through gates, gaps, and bridlepaths. 'Ha !' repeated he, 'you may try them earths ; but they're all stopped, everyone on 'em. I was there before break o' day this morning, and closed 'em up so that a mouse couldn't

get in. For besides being second whip, kennel huntsman, and feeder, I'm earth-stopper as well, and all for fifteen shillings a week. Ha! the pay an't great; but it's as much as the squire can afford, I expect. Come up, old 'oss!

'Do you see that magpie?' observed the squire. 'She's mobbing the sinking fox;' and as he spoke a bird on the wing was seen in the distance darting to the ground, and then rising high in the air to stoop again. 'The magpie, crow, and jay,' continued he, 'love to mob a sinking fox. Keep your eyes for'ard, it will soon be from scent to view.'

With their heads up and sterns down, the hounds now raced along, and the squire and his first whip had to ride hard to enable them to live the pace they were going.

'I should like to see a bit of the finish

o' this,' said the second whip to himself. 'Come up, old 'oss!' and answering to the call made upon him the 'old 'oss' frisked into a canter, and carried his rider in the line of the chase, far behind, it is true, but still in the wake of those who went before. 'I should like to see a bit of the finish o' this,' repeated he, and the double thong was once more applied to stimulate the 'old 'oss,' who responded to it by doing his best.

'That's it!' ejaculated the second whip. 'That's the squire's ringing who-whoop. You may hear it a mile down wind any day. They've pulled him down—the flying devils—without a check from find to finish in as fast a run as ever I crawled behind at. But Bill Baxter—that's me—knows how and where to nick in, and get over the country, without going the pace, which he couldn't go if he

would, and wouldn't if he could. Come up, old 'oss !

'Who-whoop!' cried Squire Oakacre, 'who-whoop!' repeated he in clear musical notes, as he held the dead fox high above his head from which he had cut the mask, pads, and brush, while the hounds, throwing their tongues in a frenzy of excitement, stood waiting impatiently for the prize to be thrown to them. 'Who-whoop!' again he cried, and the welkin rang and echoed with the death halloo.

Before the carcase reached the ground, eager jaws and ready teeth seized it, and, amid growls and wrangling, it was broken up, leaving not a fragment of the remains of as gallant a fox as ever ran for his life from the Home Wood.

'Thirty-five minutes without a check,' observed the squire, glancing at his watch.

'We had all the finish to ourselves,' re-

turned Griselda, holding his horse close by, who, with Gazelle, stood with their heads between their knees, and both looked as having gone 'too fast to last.'

'Selfish as it may appear,' said the squire, laughing, 'there is nothing more enjoyable than in a run like this to be at the kill with nobody near, as it is with us to-day. But here they come,' and, as he spoke, the beaten-off field began to appear in twos and threes, limited numbers, and in irregular line, straggling in the distance.

'Fastest thing I ever was in,' remarked one, upon pulling up his horse with heaving flanks.

'I couldn't live with them,' rejoined another, arriving at a gentle trot.

'It was more like racing than hunting,' observed a third. 'My horse was chopped at the beginning.'

‘Permit me the pleasure of presenting the brush to my first whip,’ said the squire, as he handed it, with a large white tag at the end, to Griselda. ‘No one could possibly deserve it more,’ continued he; ‘for a better or straighter rider to hounds was never seen.’

The first whip would have expressed her thanks for the hearty, genuine compliment paid to her in the presence of the whole field of horsemen, including ‘old Grumblestone,’ who had arrived too late to be in at the death; but her joy was too great for utterance, and she received the trophy with a graceful bow in silence as loud plaudits were expressed unanimously around.

‘What have we here?’ said the squire, taking the reins from the hands of the first whip, and remounting his horse. ‘Is that *you*, Chickabiddy?’ continued he, look-

ing with astonishment at what may be historically described as a mournful procession approaching the spot of the triumphant kill.

Orlando Chickabiddy, smeared, if not soaked, with black mud from head to heel, was in the immediate front of a high, leggy, tucked-up, ewe-necked horse, led slowly by Cock Robin, with his eyes cast modestly upon the ground before him, as if measuring his steps with mathematical exactness, and holding in one hand a hat smashed together from crown to brim.

‘Where have you been, my friend?’ continued the squire, scarcely able to suppress a laugh. ‘You look as having come to grief.’

‘If being plunged head foremost into a deep, narrow ditch, with two feet at least of black mud at the bottom, means, Mr. Oakacre, coming to grief,’ replied Orlando

Chickabiddy, in a dignified manner blended with extreme irritability of tone, 'then, sir, I most unquestionably have come to grief. Had it not been for this good young man——'

At this juncture 'old Grumblesome' and Cock Robin might have been seen to exchange signals. The former seemed to roll the end of his tongue in a protruding cheek, and the other to momentarily screw up one of his eyes.

'Had it not have been for this good young man,' repeated Orlando Chickabiddy, pointing with a straightened finger to his deliverer, 'I might have been positively smothered.'

'I really am most sorry,' said the squire, 'to hear of this accident.'

'You may, of course, feel most profoundly sorry, Mr. Oakacre,' responded Orlando Chickabiddy, with increasing ire;

‘but I must be permitted to add that you don’t look so. I should like, indeed, to see you supremely happy, in order to know the difference in the expression of your features between sorrow and joy.’

‘Well, well!’ exclaimed the squire, unable to restrain from a burst of hearty laughter. ‘No bones were broken, luckily.’

‘But every bone in my body feels dislocated, Mr. Oakacre,’ rejoined Orlando Chickabiddy. ‘I ran, also, an imminent risk of being smothered in the most offensive black mud I ever smelt or tasted in my life, and had it not been for this good young man——’

‘Old Grumblesome’ and Cock Robin again exchanged signals.

‘Who rescued me from my perilous position,’ continued the speaker, ‘by dragging me by the legs or heels from the

dreadful depths of the horrible ditch, I might, and indeed should have been a lifeless corpse. This good young man,' and he pointed to Cock Robin as an object of universal and particular interest, will henceforth be considered by me as my preserver from the jaws of death. He wiped the choking mud from my mouth with his pocket-handkerchief; removed it from my face and head by a vigorous rubbing: scraped it off my clothes with his knife, and rendered me as free from the effects of the terrible immersion as the surrounding circumstances would permit. I have made this public acknowledgment,' continued Orlando Chickabiddy, drawing himself to his full height and throwing out his chest as far as it would go, 'in justice to the Christian virtues of what I believe to be a good young man.'

Signals were once more exchanged between Cock Robin and 'old Grumble-some.'

'You had better, perhaps,' said the squire, 'make the best of your way home as soon as possible.'

'I am perfectly aware of that, Mr. Oakacre,' replied Orlando Chickabiddy, with almost frigid coldness. 'I am perfectly certain, sir, judging from my own feelings, that the sooner I arrive at home and go to bed the better.'

'Get, then, into your saddle again,' suggested the squire, 'and let this friend-in-need of yours lead your horse.'

'I will avail myself of your excellent advice, Mr. Oakacre,' rejoined Orlando Chickabiddy, almost gladly.

With a little ready assistance from Cock Robin, who supplemented the feeble effort by a muscular push from behind, Orlando

Chickabiddy remounted, and taking the crushed and battered hat from the hands of the 'good young man' he put it upon his bald and mud-besmeared brow, and with a single wave of the hand, remarkable for its solemnity, commenced his journey homewards with a fixed resolution that his first day's fox-hunting should be his last.

CHAPTER IX.

WALKING under, and from under, the apple-tree with its drooping branches on the lawn, Miss Penelope Peepem promenaded to and fro one morning with her nephew, having to carry out a diplomatic design of her own which, as she thought, required the utmost skill and delicacy to bring to a successful and triumphant issue.

It was therefore that she maintained an unbroken silence in their walk, under and from under the apple-tree, in order to gather her thoughts together, and concentrate them into a focus, so as to possess the

required mental force for the anticipated attainment of her object.

This reticence having continued until it became positively irksome to bear any longer, Edward Slomax thought an amendment might be moved on the original resolution of saying nothing, and made a general remark about the condition of the weather.

‘If it doesn’t rain before night,’ said he, ‘we shall have a dry day.’

‘I’m quite of your opinion, giant,’ replied Miss Penelope Peepem. ‘Nothing, indeed, could express my opinion upon the subject more clearly or concisely. But dismissing the weather,’ continued she, ‘for a short time, at least, may I ask you, my dear giant, to give me your undivided attention for a few minutes upon a matter of tremendous importance to yourself and Griselda?’

Had she raised her eyes quickly from the ground, she might have seen her nephew's features become suddenly flushed; but the colour fled and left no trace before it could be observed.

‘I’m all attention, most lovable of aunts,’ replied he, drawing one of her arms through his and clasping a hand as it rested upon his wrist. ‘Now, what is this matter of tremendous importance?’

Miss Penelope Peepem, finding herself at a loss to begin her address, brought forward a little affected cough, which seemed to answer the purpose of filling up the vacant interval.

‘The time has arrived,’ at length she began.

Edward Slomax felt relieved with the knowledge that these introductory words were not within the hearing of his impatient cousin.

‘The time has arrived,’ repeated she, ‘for us to have a serious and confidential consultation together about things past, present, and to come.’

‘What awful subjects for discussion, most lovable of aunts!’ exclaimed the giant. ‘You really make me tremble at the very thought of them.’

‘Don’t talk nonsense, giant,’ responded Miss Penelope Peepem, and the diminutive lace cap fluttered from its position as she spoke, and once more threatened to publish the bald spot. ‘Nothing that *I* could say, or all the inhabitants of the earth, both before and after the flood, could make you tremble with fear, I know.’

‘What confidence you must have in my pluck!’ rejoined he, laughing.

‘I have,’ returned Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘in the full belief that, as Griselda often says in language not quite so refined

as I could wish, you are most plucky.'

'My cousin pays me a high compliment,' said Edward Slomax, with a deeply-drawn sigh, which, if not completely lost upon his aunt's sense of hearing, was most certainly little understood by her as springing from the source of a love-sick heart.'

'But now,' resumed she, 'to begin what I have to say, which, by way of commencement, refers exclusively to the early history of your childhood, giant.'

'Let the introduction be as short as possible,' added he. 'For what I remember of it, nothing could possibly be more objectionable than my ways, manners, conduct, and misconduct.'

'Your early boyish faults and foibles, giant,' responded his aunt, smiling, 'were no doubt both natural and acquired by assiduous study, more particularly those successful schemes and designs for teasing

and, I may add, torturing—positively torturing—your cousin.’

The giant felt at this moment an impulsive desire to inflict prompt and personal torture upon himself by running his nose against the trunk of the apple-tree, but, with commendable self-restraint, the emotion passed away without damage to his facial attractions.

‘Without dwelling, however, upon the excusable, if not justifiable, faults and foibles of your early boyhood,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘invariably concentrated in one fixed, if not obstinate determination to disturb the peace and comfort of your cousin as soon as she awoke, and after she even slumbered in peaceful sleep——’

The giant at these words gathered himself together for a sudden rush against the trunk of the apple-tree; but wiser

thoughts prevailed, and he walked on quietly by the side of his aunt in a mood free from all apparent excitement.

‘Without dwelling,’ she resumed, ‘upon these faults and foibles of your early boyhood, you were, to me, the dearest little monkey that ever lived on the face of the earth, as you are now the biggest.’

‘Oh, most lovable of aunts!’ exclaimed her companion, ‘don’t, don’t call me a big monkey.’

‘I do,’ rejoined she; ‘and, as a proof of my affection, I repeat it. Nothing is more fascinating to me than monkeys, big and little, male and female. Griselda is a monkey, full of mischief, and so are you.’

In the twinkling of something like an incandescent electric spark, Miss Penelope Peepem found herself clutched between the stalwart arms of her nephew, and,

being lifted bodily from the ground, had to submit to a most violent embrace, with her ankles exposed and her feet dangling helplessly in the air.

‘You are really too strong, giant, for a weak, helpless woman to be grappled with in this highly indecorous fashion,’ said she, slightly gasping from loss of breath, as she regained her feet; ‘and I must peremptorily insist upon no second assault of the kind being committed, in thought, word, or deed. My own private ankles might have been exposed to public gaze, had the prying eyes of the British public been present to gratify its vulgar curiosity.’

‘And to the great admiration of the most critical,’ added the giant, thoroughly well knowing the vulnerable link in his aunt’s chain-armour; ‘commanding unanimous praise, followed by loud plaudits.’

‘If you utter another syllable upon this strictly-forbidden subject,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, with the utmost seriousness of manner at her immediate command, ‘I shall certainly retire. The discussion must end here, or I shall certainly retire.’

‘And so practically terminate the confidential consultation about things past, present, and to come, before it is even commenced?’ returned he. ‘Most lovable of aunts, pray open the subject without further delay.’

‘I will,’ added Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘conditionally that my ankles are allowed to remain where they are, and where they ought to be, veiled and screened from all observation, whether ocular or verbal.’

Her nephew having given an earnest assurance that the condition should be complied with, Miss Penelope Peepem

cleared her voice with a slight, nervous cough, and then began.

‘The time has arrived——’

Her nephew could not entirely suppress a groan, which rumbled inwardly.

‘For me to refer to the time,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘when you were consigned to my care and protection by your greatly lamented father, Lieutenant Slomax. At the time of his carrying out this project, which subsequently proved to be the joy of my heart——’

The giant’s arms became convulsively extended, as if again to clasp somebody or something; but, recovering his self-possession, he dropped them, and looked placidly resigned to anything that might follow.

‘Which subsequently proved to be the joy of my heart,’ repeated she, with great and measured deliberation. ‘It was ac-

accompanied by a written promise to periodically correspond with me concerning your health, welfare, and education, and convey from time to time his affectionate, parental views upon these most interesting subjects concerning his only child.'

'Which promise was, of course, kept,' observed the giant, patting the back of the hand which still rested upon his wrist, 'as became a loving father, an officer, and a gentleman.'

'The lieutenant certainly wrote periodically,' responded Miss Penelope Peepem; 'for I received three letters from him at the equal and distant dates of one year each; and with the third terminated the whole of his communications concerning his parental views.'

'Without, I suppose, much improvement in the regularity of remittances to meet the necessary outlay, most lovable of aunts,'

remarked he, glancing downwards with a smile at his companion.

‘An officer in the army,’ rejoined she, ‘even upon full pay, has a decided difficulty in making both ends meet if he has nothing additional to depend upon than his pay, poor fellow. I am, therefore, not much surprised that no remittances came to hand, as my man of business speaks of them commercially to this day, although the lieutenant intimated that the next post would certainly convey a banker’s bill. I can only say that if the next post, or a great many succeeding posts, ever conveyed a banker’s bill, it was never delivered into my possession in trust for you, giant, and my conscience acquits me of the smallest criminal act of embezzlement;’ and then Miss Penelope Peepem thought she possessed the perfect right to laugh, like other people, at her own wise, or

otherwise, parts of speech, and did so in the ordinary manner of, temporarily, distorting her features.

‘My father, then, does not appear to have given himself much personal trouble about me,’ observed her nephew, ‘or contributed greatly to my support.’

‘I can’t say that he did,’ she returned, ‘beyond writing the three annual letters; but then his martial duties may have completely absorbed every moment of his time, and his ready cash, probably, ran far too short to make both ends meet, poor fellow.’

‘Under the most adverse circumstances,’ said her companion, ‘I think he might have written oftener, and at much shorter intervals.’

‘I shall raise no dispute whatever upon this particular branch of the subject,’ added Miss Penelope Peepem, decisively.

‘It, indeed, would be worse than useless to do so, as the lieutenant has long, long years since—’ she raised a pocket-handkerchief to her eyes to stop two unshed tears swimming in them, and, after a pause, added—‘been removed from all writing materials. I saw a paragraph under the head of intelligence from Jamaica announcing his death, poor lamb! and, as you were too young at the moment to comprehend the magnitude of your loss, I kept it a profound secret until the time arrived’—a slightly suppressed groan was heard—‘for my divulging it,’ continued the narrator, ‘so as not to shock your feelings.’

‘How did I receive the melancholy tidings?’ inquired he. ‘I trust, in a manner becoming a son for such a depressing communication?’

‘You were tickling your sleeping cou-

sin's nose with a feather when I commenced the intelligence,' replied Miss Penelope Peepem, 'and you continued to tickle it to the end.'

Revengeful thoughts once more took possession of the giant's breast, and he looked savagely at the trunk of the apple-tree, as if again ready for a tilt.

'Upon the rudiments of your education being completed by myself, teaching you, my dear giant, your A B C and words of one syllable with great difficulty, as you may recollect, from systematic inattention and total disregard of my admonishing your neglect, I most reluctantly parted with you to become a public school-boy, and go to Rugby, where, if the classics and mathematics were, to some extent, neglected, you greatly distinguished yourself in cricket, football, wrestling, and pugilistic encounters, for which you were

occasionally, giant, most properly birched.'

'Oh, don't say that, most lovable of aunts!' ejaculated he. 'You bring forcibly to my recollection retributive justice for breaches of arbitrary orders and truly stern discipline. Let us change the subject.'

'Upon finishing your academical studies at Rugby,' continued Miss Penelope Peep-em, for she had resolved that the subject should not be changed just at present, 'I offered you the choice of the universities, Oxford or Cambridge, and you selected Cambridge, where, as at Rugby, you acquired high renown in athletic sports, and became stroke-oar in the university eight, and captain of the university eleven.'

'And you cannot deny, most lovable and indulgent of aunts,' returned her companion, patting the back of the hand still resting upon his wrist, 'but that you were

as proud as a little peacock, or peahen, at my achieving these distinctions.'

'If I acknowledge my weakness in this respect,' responded Miss Penelope Peepem, with serious gravity of demeanour, 'I must also express my extreme disappointment at your not being in the Tripos, either high up or low down. In short, your name was not in the Tripos at all, and you failed to become a gold medallist.'

'I did not even try for the honours you refer to, most lovable of aunts,' added her nephew, with a rather careless indifference of manner as he sauntered by her side, 'and therefore logically I cannot be charged with failing to secure that which I made no attempt to win. But you shall see what I will do when called to the bar. I'll let them have it!' and as he concluded the sentence he thrust out a

clenched fist with a force sufficient to bring an ox upon his knees.

‘Don’t be violent, giant,’ expostulated Miss Penelope Peepem, closing her eyes. ‘Pray, don’t be violent or you’ll upset my nervous system. Let us continue our discussion in peaceful tranquillity.’

‘By all means,’ rejoined he, becoming instantly subdued at this appeal, and looking as meek and mild as could be desired. ‘Let the calumet of peace be smoked between us as it has been, is, and ever will be smoked, most lovable of aunts, if my daily prayers are responded to.’

‘If offered in the true Christian spirit of faith,’ returned Miss Penelope Peepem, having recourse to her pocket-handkerchief as she invariably did when spiritual matters were mentioned. ‘I entertain no doubt whatever of your affectionate petition being not only heard but granted.’

We shall smoke——’ but her feelings were too overcome from emotion, and the broken sentence remained unfinished.

After a brief interval she recovered her composure, and with a steady voice and calm manner took up the thread of her discourse.

‘Having quitted Cambridge you are now a member of the Honourable Society of the Middle Temple preparing to be called to the bar, a most splendid position, as I am told by my man of business, for a young man determined to get on in life and obtain forensic distinction.’

Not being aware of the splendour of his position, the giant felt in some degree cheered with the gratifying information imparted to him.

‘You will then wear a wig and a gown, and be called my learn-ed friend,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, proudly; ‘go

to court, or into court, as a matter of right, and, in fact, claim all the privileges of the bar.'

'I hope they will be associated with substantial benefits in the shape of mutton chops and meally potatoes,' responded her companion.

'While I am permitted to enjoy my life interest,' rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, and her voice seemed to falter slightly as she spoke, 'you will not experience the want of mutton chops or meally potatoes. The past in this respect may be accepted as a guide for the future. Your cousin and yourself have shared my life-interest from the moment you were, most fortunately for me, committed to my care, and you will continue to do so until——' the words were delivered with a more decided quiver—'I am summoned to depart for a state of pure, angelic bliss, and conse-

quently happier condition of existence than the present, although not satisfactorily defined in all the particulars as I could wish. My life-interest'—she quite broke down, and buried her nose temporarily in the folds of her handkerchief—'will cease when, as my man of business says, my life falls in ; but why *in* 'instead of *out* I never could understand. Nothing, however, can be more positively certain than that, as he says, my life-interest will stop short as soon as I cast off this mortal coil. The high court of Chancery must be applied to for instructions as to the reversionary interests. A receiver will be appointed, and when that receiver will part with what he has received, no one gifted even with the extraordinary powers of prophecy could foretell within the natural limits of a generation or two.'

‘A bad look out for the reversionary interests,’ remarked the giant.

‘Very,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, shaking her head with closed eyes. ‘Very.’

‘I wouldn’t guarantee the next of kin,’ returned he, ‘often revelling in mutton chops and mealy potatoes.’

‘Neither would I,’ added Miss Penelope Peepem. ‘Neither would I,’ she repeated. ‘It would be too hazardous, and might lead to great disappointment.’

‘It appears to me,’ said the giant, stopping suddenly in his walk, and gazing earnestly in his aunt’s face, ‘that the next of kin have a devilish bad look out.’

‘Satanic in the extreme!’ ejaculated Miss Penelope Peepem, emphatically. ‘Satanic in the extreme!’

‘They had better, as a matter of pre-

caution,' responded he, 'look out for squalls.'

'Your opinion so entirely agrees with mine, giant,' returned Miss Penelope Peepem, 'that I shall at once confide my principal motive, and little innocent plan for carrying it out, in systematically seeking this conference with you. I may rely upon your assistance, I know.'

'At all times, and under any circumstances,' rejoined he, 'you may command my best and loyal efforts.'

'The time has arrived—'

He winced as if touched unexpectedly with the point of a sharp pin.

'For your cousin to seriously think of settling in life,' continued Miss Penelope Peepem, 'and she can only do so advantageously by marrying a rich man.'

Edward Slomax, a member of the Honorable Society of the Middle Temple, felt at

this moment what the true value of money meant, if he had never done so before in the whole course of his life.

‘I have on more than one occasion,’ resumed she, ‘brought this subject most forcibly to Griselda’s attention, and her too careless and somewhat indifferent reply has generally been that she had no objection to marry a rich husband. Where should she find one? Now,’ continued Miss Penelope Peepem, with infinite exultation in her tone and manner, ‘I think that, to save all further trouble upon this delicate subject, I have found one for her.’

The aspirant for legal distinction stopped suddenly in his walk, and stared in his aunt’s face as motionless as if turned into stone.

‘You look surprised,’ said she; ‘but I know you will be pleased beyond measure to learn that my selection is the sole owner

and possessor of a gold mine, if common report may be believed.'

'You don't mean—'

Miss Penelope Peepem disengaged her hands, and, bringing the palms together with a loud crack, shouted, 'I do.'

'Heaven, earth, and ocean!' exclaimed he, and his brain reeled as he spoke. 'Not Chickabiddy?'

'Don't guess twice,' rejoined she pressing a hand playfully over his lips. 'You would be sure to guess wrong if you did.'

'What, that little cad for my cousin's husband?' and the giant's massive fists were then and there clenched as if preparing for somebody or something.

Miss Penelope Peepem became instantly serious even to gravity.

'I do not see why the proprietor of a noble mansion like Hawkhurst and its

surroundings,' said she, with conspicuous indignation in her tone and manner, 'to say nothing of the gold mine, should be designated a little cad.'

'But without the noble mansion and the gold mine,' responded he, with a demeanour approaching to fierceness, 'you would be among the first to call him what he is—a little cad.'

Miss Penelope Peepem was seized at this precise moment with a cough which stifled speech.

'I hope that, under the most objectionable circumstances,' she returned, at the termination of the cough, whether real or artificial, 'that I should not call Mr. Orlando Chickabiddy by any improper name. He is, certainly, not developed upon a large scale, and might be improved in his personal appearance if he wore a wig. I do not shut my eyes to these drawbacks.

Certainly not. At the same time, looking at Griselda's substantial benefit from such an alliance, and her helpless position upon my departure to a better world,'—her voice became slightly tremulous,—‘I do not hesitate to, alternately, both hope and pray that my dear Griselda may eventually become Mrs. Chickabiddy;’ and, breaking down at the conclusion of the sentence, Miss Penelope Peepem shed tears in a copious shower, trying effectually to stop their overflow through the medium of her handkerchief.

Upon removing it from her eyes, after an interval of a few seconds, she found to her profound astonishment that the giant had taken a secret and abrupt departure. She was alone under the apple-tree.

CHAPTER X.

IN the library of Oakacre Court, a dark, gloomy-looking room, with shelves upon shelves from floor to ceiling, packed closely with old books bearing no appearance of having been read or even touched by the hand of man or woman for a very long time, sat the squire, negligently dressed in morning gown and slippers, faced by Orlando Chickabiddy.

The subject under discussion was evidently one of great, if not of absorbing, interest, for the squire, leaning forward in his high-backed carved chair, clasped the

arms firmly with both hands, and seemed to be literally devouring the words spoken with volubility and earnestness by his companion, who not only warmed as he went on, but appeared upon the eve of becoming red-hot.

‘I tell you, sir,’ said he, ‘that there are but two sources from which gold can be got, not one more nor one less. There is the floating gold which was once taken from the mine, and there is the gold which still remains in the mine ready to be taken out of the mine by those who know how to get at it. *I* am one of those,’ and the speaker gave his little pigeon breast a significant touch with a fore-finger.

‘I am most delighted to hear it,’ replied Squire Oakacre, gently chafing his hands together, with evident pleasure at what had been related to him, ‘most delighted. A man is not met with every day,’ continued he,

smiling, 'who knows how to get at a gold mine and put his hands upon it.'

'There is no doubt whatever,' resumed Mr. Chickabiddy, with a flourish of his own particular stamp, 'that more gold remains in the solid rock at the present time than has ever yet been quarried out of it.'

'You really astonish me,' rejoined the squire. 'Perfectly astonish me. But I must confess that I have never given the subject even a single thought.'

'I have given it, sir, many thoughts, morning, noon, and night,' returned Orlando Chickabiddy, 'and greatly to the credit side of my banker's account. As a promoter of public companies by profession, embracing vast undertakings, some scarcely begun before they were finished, and a few never finished until handed over to the official liquidator, I know the effec-

tual means of getting at the floating gold or capital always to be found in the pockets of that large part of the British public disposed to become shareholders in any undertaking which presents an enticement and opportunity for a gamble. In bringing out a company, the first thing for the promoter to think of is, can the prospectus be issued which the investing public will believe in, and the speculating public—a considerable portion of the commercial and trading classes—be tempted so as to go in for a right-down good gamble? Nothing more is necessary, sir, for floating a company with unquestionable success, taking care, by judicious rigging of the market, that the shares come out well backed, rise by degrees, and stand at a good premium, until, to quote the words of the Throgmorton Street poet,

“ You take away the props,
And down they drops.”’

‘ All this is as unintelligible to me,’ observed the squire, ‘ as if spoken in the Chinese or Japanese languages.’

‘ No doubt of it, Mr. Oakacre,’ rejoined Orlando Chickabiddy, ‘ and I did not for one moment suppose that you would, could, or should understand what I was telling you, sir. It takes the practical experience of years, and the best part of a man’s lifetime, to comprehend the intricacies, wily secrets, and stupendous circumventions of the Stock Exchange. But previous to laying my plan before you, Mr. Oakacre, for turning the possession of my gold-mine into that of a limited company, I wished you to clearly understand that you would be in the hands of a man’—he again tapped his little pigeon-breast with a fore-finger—‘ who thorough-

ly understands his business. Having passed an apprenticeship, I may say without bunkum that few in this world are better qualified to float a company than myself. I know every rope in the ship.'

'If I understand you rightly, however,' returned the squire, 'the project in view is a certain benefit to each and all concerned.'

'A perfect certainty,' added Orlando Chickabiddy, with the essence of confidence in his tone and manner—'a foregone conclusion.'

'May I ask, therefore,' said the squire, 'but of course only for information, why it is that you don't keep this gold-mine in your own exclusive possession?'

'You might as well ask, Mr. Oakacre,' replied Orlando Chickabiddy, 'why the man who projected the establishing of the Bank of England did not keep it in his

own exclusive possession. It would doubtlessly have been a nice little snug thing for him, but he knew, as I know, that the Bank of England was too large for any individual to manage single-handed. He, therefore, determined most wisely, like a good man of business, to lessen the difficulties of management by dividing it. Hence its governor, board of directors, chief cashier, proprietors, and general of officers and subordinates. With a corresponding view of forming my gold mine into a company I mean to take similar means as the man adopted who established the Bank of England. I shall go to the public. There is nothing like going to the public, Mr. Oakacre, when you can offer the public a good taking bait. They rise at it, sir, like fish at a fly, and it matters not how often they have been pricked, or even hooked, they are sure to come again

and again, so long as the lure is continued to be thrown by a skilful hand. Mine has never yet failed, Mr. Oakacre. I have attacked—using the term advisedly—the coined gold in the pockets of the British public with great success, but the game is played out, and I mean now to go in for the gold which remains uncoined and glitters only in the uncrushed, solid quartz.’

‘There is no doubt of its being there, I suppose,’ remarked the squire, somewhat confused, and not entirely free from suspicion that the antecedents of Mr. Chickabiddy were all that could be desired in accordance with the Christian code of ‘doing unto others as you would they should do unto you.’

‘If not there,’ responded his companion, drawing back the angles of his mouth in the form of a parenthesis, ‘why should I

be here? *I* am here by appointment this morning, Mr. Oakacre, to submit a plan to you by which a large sum of ready money will flow—positively flow—into your pockets without an effort, mental or physical, or the smallest personal trouble on your part.’

‘I do not hesitate to state in strict confidence,’ rejoined the squire, ‘that a moderate sum of ready money would relieve me from much anxiety and considerable inconvenience.’

‘So I thought,’ returned Orlando Chickabiddy, throwing back the collar of his coat, and placing his inverted thumbs in the corners of his waistcoat. ‘So I thought,’ repeated he.

‘I am not involved in debt,’ resumed the squire, ‘but so much of my rent-roll is deducted for the interest of long existing charges upon the property, that I am often

compelled to appear mean when I wish to be generous.'

'So I thought,' repeated Mr. Chickabiddy, maintaining his attitude of the combined thumbs and waistcoat. 'So I thought,' repeated he.

'With more economy than I like to practise,' continued the squire, 'I keep my hounds, hunting them myself to save expense, without subscription, and do all that I can to support my position as their Master in this county and as a landed proprietor; but it is not done without a struggle, sir.'

'So I thought,' again reiterated Mr. Chickabiddy. 'So I thought,' repeated he.

'I am often compelled to postpone the payment of my obligations,' continued the squire, 'and like all men, I believe, in want of money, frequently use subterfuges

and humiliating excuses for not promptly meeting my engagements.'

'So I thought,' said Mr, Chickabiddy with a profound nod of the head, and still keeping his position. 'So I thought,' repeated he.

'You will, therefore, easily understand,' continued the squire, 'what mental relief it would be to——'

'Have a share in my gold-mine,' added Orlando Chickabiddy, laughing, 'and I am quite ready to give you not only one, but several shares.'

'I could not, my dear sir,' rejoined the squire, with great seriousness of manner, 'accept as a gift anything so valuable. I should consider it unjust, and almost dishonourable, to take a part, however small, of your property without making a fair and equitable return for the possession of it.'

‘This can be done,’ returned Mr. Chickabiddy, removing his thumbs and throwing himself backwards in his chair with portrayed satisfaction, ‘in a way which cannot fail to meet every real or imaginary obstacle. Your name, Mr. Oakacre, announced as the chairman of this gold-mining company would bring the whole of Hampshire in as shareholders. They would tumble over each other, sir, in their rush for shares, and the easy and successful floating of it rendered a positive certainty through the sole influence and popularity of your valued name. From my point of view, and I hope that you will consider it a liberal one, I shall deem this an adequate return for the substantial stake I intend that you should possess without the outlay of a single penny. I will not conceal from you, sir, that I, as the promoter of this great company, shall

be a gainer by the arrangement. You could not fail, Mr. Oakacre, to be a gainer, as, putting nothing in, you would simply take something out in the shape of fees as Chairman of the Board of Directors, premiums on shares allotted to you at par, and dividends from profits when declared.'

'A great and heavy responsibility, however, would seem to rest on my shoulders,' observed the squire, thoughtfully.

'None whatever,' quickly retorted Mr. Chickabiddy, drawing from one of the pockets of his coat a brightly-coloured map, and, unfolding it, handed it to the squire for inspection. 'There is the gold,' continued he, 'in the longitudinal section estimated at the value of twelve to fifteen millions of pounds sterling.'

The squire gasped at these words, and his eyes became riveted in a blinkless gaze upon the longitudinal section.

‘It is not, Mr. Oakacre, as if the rich lode had still to be discovered,’ resumed Orlando Chickabiddy. ‘There it is,’ and he pressed the end of a finger upon a small yellow space in the map, ‘as any shareholder may see for himself. No responsibility, therefore, can rest upon your shoulders, and you will meet in the end with nothing but everlasting gratitude from the Hampshire proprietors for being the factor for enriching them to a fabulous extent.’

‘It would seem,’ remarked the squire, with his eyes still fixed on the longitudinal section, ‘that everybody concerned is to be benefited.’

‘Without an exception,’ responded Mr. Chickabiddy. ‘Everybody, without an exception.’

‘As you know, my dear sir, I am totally unacquainted with mining business,’ re-

joined the squire, 'or, indeed, any other, and, in consenting to become the chairman of this projected gold company, I should really know nothing about the duties of the office.'

'No chairmen do,' returned Mr. Chickabiddy. 'It is not necessary that they should. Any gentleman with a handle to his name or not, so long as he sits in the chair when required, or gets the vice-chairman to take his place when inconvenient to himself to occupy it, is fully qualified for all the duties and responsibilities of the office.'

'They do not sound very onerous,' observed the squire, with a smile, carefully folding the map after a last and lingering look at the longitudinale section.

'Nothing, I venture to say,' added Mr. Chickabiddy, 'could possibly be less irksome or exhaustive. To occasionally sit

in a well-stuffed easy chair is about as little laborious work as any man could modestly expect to be called upon to perform for ten thousand a year.'

The squire started from his seat, and his slippers flew from his feet as he did so.

'Ten thousand a year!' he exclaimed, looking as if the words had galvanised him.

'And perhaps more,' returned Orlando Chickabiddy, with serene and imperturbable coolness. 'If the lode continues to yield, as it now does, without picking the eyes out of the mine, six ounces to the ton of crushed quartz, your income, Mr. Oakacre, from the shares which I, as the vendor of this extraordinary property, consisting exclusively of a pure quartz matrix, and promoter of the company, shall allot to you at par, your income will exceed, and greatly exceed, ten thousand a year.'

The squire's breath seemed checked, if not temporarily stopped, by the announcement, and he could only wring Mr. Chickabiddy's hand in silence until he took his departure.

CHAPTER XI.

THE night arrived in its turn, as all days and nights must so long as time goes on, for the annual Hunt Ball to be given by the gentlemen hunting regularly, or in accordance with their convenience or inclination, with 'the Oakacre fox-hounds,' and the assembly rooms in the adjacent market-town being specially engaged for this special purpose, all the arrangements, to the most minute particular, were carried out and completed in a highly satisfactory manner by the committee chosen to bear the heavy responsibility of executive authority.

There were the flags, and the fiddlers, harp, trumpet, trombone, flute, flageolet, and drum. In short, a full band, with the drum, perhaps, a little too full for perfectly sound and sensitive ears free from all impediment. Hot tea and scalding coffee could be had for the asking, or without if intelligible signs were made, and there appeared to be no limits to the supply of biscuits, cakes, buns, and bread and butter fresh from the oven and the churn. In fact quite new, and therefore indigestible. Lights in dazzling numbers blazed from the ceiling and the walls, as if wax candles were cheap in the extreme, or the committee of management censurably extravagant, and the floor chalked in elaborate designs of flowers and fruit that never grew since the flood, at any rate, looked too artistic to be danced upon.

All was ready for the arrival of the ex-

pected company, and punctually at the appointed time a few entered the assembly rooms to be received by the committee of management in due state and form, while others came later, and a few latest, from motives of their own, not unassociated with the belief that it was the right thing to do.

Having determined within himself to open the ball with Griselda Peepem, John Oakacre, Esq., M.F.H., in full regimentals of new scarlet coat, white waistcoat, stiffly starched cravat to match, and his fringe of grey hair expressly curled for the occasion by the village barber, began to feel slightly ill at ease at the delay of her advent. The room was full enough for dancing to commence, the fiddlers had tuned their fiddles until tuning became tiresome to listen to, and the harpist looked out of temper with continually twanging the strings of his

harp to little purpose ; but still the master of the ceremonies, John Oakacre, Esq., M.F.H., made no sign for a beginning to be made in what was unanimously agreed to be the absence of the belle of the Hunt Ball. As absolute dictator, notwithstanding the committee of management, he exercised an arbitrary right, and none present seemed disposed to interfere with it.

Among the latest, if not the last of the arrivals, were Miss Penelope Peepem, her niece, and nephew. As they entered the room there seemed to be, and indeed was, a little flutter of excitement. Proud as fond, and fond as proud, of the young and beautiful girl by her side, Miss Penelope Peepem swept in with a bearing which to be seen must be remembered. In black velvet with a train of no mean length, and the bald spot well protected by a lace cap of sufficient size to act as a perfect shield,

Miss Penelope Peepem with head erect and graceful bearing, as became a recognized member of one of the oldest of the county families, advanced to exchange friendly greetings with her admirer of other days, John Oakacre, and as she gave him her hand, which he pressed as warmly as when he danced with her too often to escape critical observation in that identical room, and upon that identical floor long years ago, her heart beat more quickly than its wont, and her thoughts were of the past.

‘I began to think,’ said he, addressing Griselda with a smile, ‘that your promise to open the ball with me would not be kept,’ and as he spoke he offered his arm, gave a signal to the leader of the full band, and as the music began the dancers took their respective places for the first dance on the list of the programme.

In a plain white silk dress, with a single

blush rose in her hair, Griselda became the focus of admiration of all the wearers of the scarlet coats, black coats, and blue coats then and there assembled beneath the ceiling of the Assembly Rooms. She never looked more attractive, and perhaps, not altogether unconscious of the silent homage paid to her beauty, her eyelids drooped, and the dark fringe of the long, silken lashes almost met as they fell upon cheeks slightly flushed and hectic in colour.

Miss Penelope Peepem from her seat against the wall—somewhat cramped and confined in order that as much available space as possible might be left to the dancers—watched her niece, and she also watched those who were watching her niece, with inexpressible pride and pleasure. The giant, sitting in a negligent position by her side, watched too; but from the stern if not angry expression upon his countenance

his watching did not appear to afford unalloyed pleasure.

The giant felt secretly disposed to exhibit his muscular strength without further provocation, and to make Orlando Chickabiddy a sacrifice to his feelings—in short, to punch his head.

‘Why don’t you dance?’ inquired his aunt. ‘There is not a girl present but would be delighted to waltz with the late captain of the Cambridge eleven.’

‘I have no inclination,’ replied he, ‘and much prefer a seat here talking to you, most lovable of aunts.’

‘You really pay me a very high compliment, giant,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem. ‘I may say that such an admission is flattering in the extreme. But I should much prefer your imitating Mr. Chickabiddy’s example by indulging in the poetry of motion.’

At this moment Orlando Chickabiddy was flourishing his legs and squaring his elbows in a most entertaining, if not graceful manner, and as directly opposed to what might be conceived the 'poetry of motion' as any exaggerated picture that the imagination could possibly sketch. He, however, held a different opinion, and continued to draw general and marked attention of the spectators, if not their unqualified admiration.

'What an ass that little fellow is making of himself!' exclaimed the giant. 'The stewards ought really to ask him to desist and sit down.'

'My dear Edward,' returned his aunt, greatly disturbed in mind and body from indications too conclusive to admit of doubt—'my dear Edward,' repeated she, 'pray be more guarded in your language and less cynical in its tone. Recollect

that you are speaking of the owner of a gold-mine.'

'Where is it?' curtly inquired he.

'You cannot mean to throw unjustifiable doubt upon its very existence,' responded Miss Penelope Peepem, becoming roused almost to the point of indignation.

'Where is it?' he repeated.

'I think John Oakacre told me,' responded his aunt, in a quiet and firm voice, as if in defiance of any further interrogatories, 'that it was situated in South America; but he particularly wished that this communication should be deemed strictly confidential.'

'No extended circulation shall be given to it by me,' returned her nephew, with a grim smile. 'The exact locality shall be kept a profound secret, at least, by me.'

'I felt sure that I might depend upon your reticence, giant,' added Miss Penelope

Peepem, 'or I should not have divulged the precise situation of Mr. Chickabiddy's gold-mine, more particularly as I am to have a liberal allotment of shares at par.'

'And what do you understand by that, most lovable of aunts?' asked he, laughing.

'I really am not prepared to give an immediate answer to your question, giant,' she replied. 'I only know, or am told, that by having a liberal allotment of shares at par a large sum of money will flow—literally flow—into my exchequer, always totally exhausted at the end of each half-year. I need scarcely say that this improved state of things in anticipation is most pleasant to contemplate.'

Further discussion upon the subject was now interrupted by Griselda's approach, leaning on the arm of as ardent an admirer as she possessed in that ball-room in the person of John Oakacre.

‘I am open, I fear, to the charge of selfishness,’ said he, addressing Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘for having claimed the right of dancing with your niece the first dance, when so many were candidates for the honour with far higher pretensions than my own ; but, old as I am, I would not give way to any one of them, not even to Chickabiddy here.’

‘It was too bad, though, to shove me out, squire,’ returned the object of his remark. ‘I had made up my mind to make all the chaps here envy me in my lead off with Miss Peepem, and you stepped in and spoiled my little game.’

Had Orlando Chickabiddy looked at Griselda as he delivered these words, instead of being engaged in looking at the reflection of himself in an adjacent mirror, he would have seen the corner of an upper lip curled with haughty contempt, and her

eyes flashing with a momentary anger.

‘I think,’ said he, ignorant from not witnessing the unpropitious symptoms, as he offered an arm to Griselda, ‘that it is now my turn.’

‘He is evidently much pleased with your cousin,’ observed Miss Penelope Peepem, as they moved away to take their places, ‘and seems to be perfectly fascinated by her.’

The giant’s hands became instantly clenched in the shape of two massive fists.

‘I scarcely think, however, that she responds to his feelings.’

The giant’s hands became suddenly relaxed and the fists disappeared.

‘But if you were to take him under your wing,’ resumed Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘and, in the University phrase, coach him, a most desirable change might be effected. I shall esteem it as a great personal favour,

giant, if you will take Mr. Chickabiddy under your wing and coach him.'

'What can you possibly want me to do with him?' asked he, with his hands slowly regaining the shape of two ponderous fists.

'Give him instructions in riding, rowing, cricket, and football,' responded his aunt. 'These accomplishments would so much elevate him in your cousin's eyes, and he so much requires elevating.'

'I've no objection whatever,' returned he, pressing his lips together at the conclusion of the sentence, and looking anything but willing to give Mr. Chickabiddy a friendly lesson. 'I have no objection whatever,' repeated he, 'to initiate him into the mysteries of football. How I will hack him!'

'Nothing could be kinder on your part,' rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, 'and I

feel sensible of an obligation in your promise to hack him. When will you begin ?

‘Now,’ replied her nephew. ‘I should like to begin now.’

‘My dear giant,’ returned she, slightly astonished at his tone and manner, ‘what, hack Mr. Chickabiddy while he is dancing ?’

‘No finer opportunity,’ added he, ‘and no finer time than the present.’

The peace of the ball-room, however, if threatened was not disturbed, and as Griselda, having completed her second dance, again approached her aunt and cousin, he rose from his seat and only scowled upon Mr. Chickabiddy, who looked hot from over-exertion. His shirt collars, losing their starch from the chemical process of evaporation, had become limp and drooped in obedience to the laws of gravity.

‘You seem to require a little cessation

from dancing, Mr. Chickabiddy,' observed Miss Penelope Peepem, with as winning a smile as she possessed in the back-ground. 'Take a seat by my side, so that I may enjoy, during the interval, a little intellectual conversation.'

'I'm out of breath, and as hot as a baked tater with its jacket on,' replied he, fanning his bald and shining forehead with his pocket-handkerchief. 'But, while I'm here, I mean to dance as much and as often as I can with your niece. She's the best all-round in the room, and nothing suits me so well as the best, no matter what it is.'

'You are most complimentary to Griselda,' rejoined her aunt, in a nervous flutter of excitement, 'and I am sure that she appreciates the praise so generously bestowed upon her by you, Mr. Chickabiddy. Nothing will please her and me

more, I may take the responsibility of stating, than your dancing as much as circumstances will permit with my niece.'

'I'm engaged for every dance,' observed Griselda, sharply, 'and wish it was time for the last to begin.'

Mr. Chickabiddy felt checked, if not checkmated, as those words were expressed in no disguised or measured tone. He came to a rapid conclusion that he had been dancing for nothing, literally nothing.

'Is your programme full?' inquired Edward Slomax, awaiting the answer with tremulous anxiety.

'Quite,' was the quick reply, accompanied by a glance which produced a slight shiver through the giant's nervous system.

'I hoped,' rejoined he, in a pleading tone and manner, 'to have had the pleas-

ure of dancing with you at least once to-night.'

'And you learn that in deferring the pleasure too long,' returned Griselda, with a corner of her upper lip curled and her brow knitted with a frown, 'it is now too late for gratifying it.'

In the fulness of time, as hour succeeded hour, the hunt ball began to evince signs of coming to an end. Some of the wax candles guttered and spluttered their speedy retirement. The band was no longer full, for the harp had ceased to twing-twang, and the drum had become subdued and calm even to dulness. The musicians to a man were worn out with their unwearied efforts to please everybody, and, having succeeded in this most difficult task, they now retired, having played the programme through, to please themselves.

The end had come. The assembly-rooms were deserted, and the hunt ball a thing of the past.

CHAPTER XII.

IT was a cold, wintry night, the ground being ice-bound, and an effectual stop, therefore, put to hunting, when Bill Baxter, having placed a small copper kettle on a blazing wood fire in his parlour, which served as kitchen, larder, cellar, 'and all,' with one or two exceptions, said to himself—a mode of conversation he frequently indulged in—'Now, Cock Robin, I'm ready for ye,' ending the sentence with a loud chuckle expressive of great inward satisfaction.

The words were scarcely spoken when

approaching footsteps were heard, and soon afterwards the latch of the outer door being pressed through the agency of, probably, a finger and thumb, a sharp click followed, and, without further introduction, Cock Robin entered the apartment, looking cold and feeling frost-bitten, particularly at the ends of his fingers and the point of his nose.

‘Devilish cold,’ said he, spreading out his hands before the wood fire and rubbing the palms briskly together with a turn over at the knuckles. ‘Devilish cold,’ he repeated, continuing the action.

‘Never heard of anybody being devilish cold,’ said Bill Baxter. ‘The parson lets us know, often enough, what devilish hot means; but I never heard him preach about devilish cold.’

‘I’m not surprised at Miss Grizzle calling you old Grumblesome,’ retorted Cock

Robin. 'A chap can't open his mouth sometimes, without your being ready to jump down it.'

'I'm not aware of being disposed to jump over, across, or down anything,' returned Bill Baxter. 'I couldn't if I would, and I wouldn't if I could. And as for the first whip calling me old Grumble-some, all I can say is let her do it as often as she likes. It won't hurt me and it may please her.'

'I said it was devilish cold,' rejoined Cock Robin, slightly wounded in his feelings, 'and you raise an objection to its being devilish cold.'

'Only upon religious grounds,' replied Bill Baxter. 'That's all. Take a chair, and as soon as the water boils we'll have a cup o' tea.'

'Tea!' exclaimed his visitor, evidently amazed at the proposition.

‘Yes,’ responded Bill Baxter. ‘Under the advice of Doctor Tom Tidy, I’ve taken lately to tea. My tissues, he says, ain’t right.’

‘What’s tissues?’ inquired Cock Robin. ‘I never heard of ’em.’

‘Nor I either,’ rejoined the second whip, ‘until Doctor Tom Tidy told me mine were not right and that I must drink tea. As soon as the water biles we’ll have a cup.’

‘So you said before,’ returned Cock Robin, ‘but I’m not in a hurry for a cup of tea.’

‘You’re not fond of tea?’

‘Can’t say I am,’ added Cock Robin. ‘it may do for old women well enough.’

Bill Baxter’s eyes twinkled with fun at his visitor’s discomfiture, but he was determined to persevere in keeping it alive.

‘When your tissues are out of order, or wabbling instead of going on like well-greased machinery, Doctor Tom Tidy says drink tea. The water biles and so we’ll have a cup.’

‘As far as *I* am concerned,’ said Cock Robin, ‘you needn’t be in a hurry.’

‘When the water biles, *I* say make your tea, not before or after,’ returned Bill Baxter, ‘but when the water biles. Them’s my sentiments upon matters in general,’ continued he, ‘and if people would only, as a rule, make their tea when the water biles, they would find out what the right time meant which is the grand secret of success. Can’t I patter a bit, Cocky?’

‘You really can, Bill,’ replied his visitor, with an approving shake of the head. ‘You give tongue, now and then, in what I call stunning style.’

The second whip having been paid this

compliment to his eloquence, which was received with becoming modesty, he went to a cupboard in a dark corner of the room and in shadow began occupying himself by rummaging the contents and placing them on the table.

‘When the water biles——’

‘You said that at least once before,’ interrupted Cock Robin, irritably. ‘Don’t trouble yourself by going on with it.’

In not proceeding with the finish of the sentence it may be assumed that the second whip became silenced by the interruption, for he said nothing more upon the subject ; but continued his hospitable task of preparing the entertainment for his visitor without uttering another syllable. Things, at length, it would seem, being in an advanced stage towards completion the little copper kettle, hissing like an enraged snake from the spout, was lifted from the blazing

wood fire by Bill Baxter, and soon afterwards a strong, pleasant, and aromatic perfume rose like incense and spread itself throughout the apartment.

‘What’s that?’ inquired Cock Robin, giving a couple of vigorous sniffs. ‘It can’t be tea.’

‘You’ve soon found out that, Cocky,’ replied his host. ‘No six seasoned hound ever challenged a fox with greater confidence, and you threw the right tongue when you said it can’t be tea. But if it isn’t tea what is it?’

‘The smell is uncommonly like lemons with a mixture of old whisky,’ replied Cock Robin, rising from his chair in order to make a closer examination of the cause of the surprising effect just discovered.

‘You’ve hit off the right scent,’ rejoined his host. ‘Punch it is, mixed by Bill Baxter—that’s me—and, if the flavour is

only equal to the smell, improvement may be put down as impossible.'

'I've almost made up my mind,' returned Cock Robin, 'not to take your word for it.'

'You might,' said the second whip, smacking his lips as he withdrew a glass from them. 'You might, Cocky; but I daresay won't.'

'By your leave I won't.'

'So I thought,' added Bill Baxter. 'Then judge for yourself whether that's a real gum tickler or a sham; for I'll swear it's either one or the other.'

'I think it's the other,' responded Cock Robin.

'Which other?' indignantly asked the second whip, looking almost ferociously at his guest. 'Do you mean to tell me that's not a gum tickler?'

'I'm not going to make my sins greater

than they are by saying anything of the sort,' replied Cock Robin. 'But before being too certain I should like to have another trial.'

'You are as artful a varmint as ever lived, Cocky,' rejoined Bill Baxter, 'and one that knows all the short cuts and nicks in across country far and near. If there is anything left for you to learn, I should like to know what it is. Another trial, eh?'

Cock Robin nodded assent.

'Very good,' observed the second whip. 'Let us sit down, then, and make ourselves comfortable for the evening. Over a bowl of punch such as this is brewed by Bill Baxter—that's me—and with a whiff of bacca, I don't think we shall find the world, for the next two or three hours, quite as miserable as some folks whine and howl about. Bring your chair close to the

fire, opposite me, Cocky, spread out your legs, and try to look, as I feel, that the county of Hampshire ought to belong to you, if it doesn't.'

Cock Robin, without raising the smallest objection, either practical or theoretical, did precisely as he was told, and, having lit the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe by applying a charred ember fallen upon the hearth, looked as independent as his host's imagination had just drawn so graphic a sketch.

'Punch, particularly when mixed with the real old mountain dew which never paid a sixpence duty——'

'If this was smuggled,' interrupted Cock Robin, 'it would go against my conscience to drink it.'

'Which never paid a sixpence duty,' repeated Bill Baxter, totally ignoring his

guest's conscientious scruple—'punch of this kind,' continued he, 'requires time to draw like tea.'

'Bother tea!' ejaculated his companion. 'Let's have no more of that rot, Bill.'

'In place, then, of any more rot, taste that,' responded the second whip, proffering a well-filled glass for 'another trial.'

Cock Robin fulfilled the instructions with combined alacrity and strictness, and, after an interval of a few moments given for reflection, pronounced the 'old mountain dew' blended, as it was, with lemon peel and thin, delicately-cut slices of lemon, 'as choice a gum tickler as ever was swallowed, which, when gone, made him feel what a real earthly loss meant.'

Bill Baxter felt flattered, and looked as

he felt, remarking that 'We only know the value of what we've had when we haven't got it to have. Such is life.' And, with this philosophical conclusion, he threw himself backwards in his chair in an attitude of the most perfect ease and indolence, and blew a thick cloud of smoke from his lips which rose slowly and curled in rings above his head.

For a time, but not for long, an unbroken silence reigned between the guest and his host, when the latter observed, as the effect, apparently, of an inward thought,

'It will be a match, I suppose?'

'A pair, but not a match, Bill,' replied Cock Robin. 'A match should be alike, but where could you find two more different?'

'In shape, make, form, pace, and colour,' rejoined the second whip, 'there were

never, I suppose, two greater opposites, and yet, it seems, they will be brought together. Such is life !

‘Then life ought to be improved,’ returned Cock Robin, ‘and the sooner somebody takes it in hand the better. I wish I had only known when Chickabiddy was in Swamp’s Hole,’ continued he, ‘that he was going to make up to Miss Grizzle, he should never have got out alive.’

‘You don’t mean to say, Cocky——’

‘Yes, I do,’ interrupted his companion, in a most emphatic tone and manner. ‘I would have left him in Swamp’s Hole, head downwards.’

‘In that case,’ rejoined the second whip, having removed with great deliberation the pipe from his lips, ‘I should have had the pleasure of rising one morning at the break of day and jogging comfortably

over to Winchester on the old 'oss to see you hanged.'

Upon the conclusion of the sentence his companion looked rather ill at ease and gave two or three quick and nervous puffs at his pipe.

'It wouldn't have been murder,' said he, in a hoarse whisper, 'would it?'

'Pure and simple,' responded Bill Baxter, 'and, as the big-wigs call it, with malice aforethought. You'd have been hanged to a certainty, Cocky.'

'I didn't put him in Swamp's Hole,' argued Cock Robin. 'He plunged in of his own accord.'

'But you would have left him there, had you known he was going to make your young missis his old woman,' rejoined the second whip, 'and that, too, by your own confession.'

'I would,' added Cock Robin, slapping

a knee with the palm of one of his broad hands. 'I would, Bill,' repeated he, 'as certain as his name's Chickabiddy.'

'Well, he's alive and you're not hanged,' remarked his host, 'and so we can drop that part of the subject. Help yourself to another glass of punch, and forget, if you can, Cocky, the risk you ran of being strung up at Winchester. At the same time, you may rely upon it that I should have been there to see the end of an old friend, violent as that end must have been.'

'It's kind of you to say so, Bill,' replied his companion, obeying the order to refill his glass, 'and you mean it as kindness, I know; but I'm not sorry that——'

'It's put off for a more favourable chance,' added the second whip. 'A pleasure deferred, but not altogether hopeless of being enjoyed.'

This was an opportune moment, Cock Robin thought, for the indulgence of a good hearty laugh, which, being followed closely by a peal of equal power from the second whip, the two seemed to be rivals in the joint and separate force of their mirth. With the unerring law, however, of all explosives, strength diminished with duration, and at length a calm, unbroken quietude regained supremacy in Bill Baxter's parlour, kitchen, 'and all.'

'I suppose it's all settled,' observed the second whip. 'How did it come about?'

'She was got at,' briefly and angrily replied Cock Robin, rolling his head from side to side. 'She was got at.'

'Nobbled?' said Bill Baxter, interrogatively.

'Nobbled,' responded his companion, with increasing anger, 'and made as safe

as a mouse in a trap. Miss Grizzle,' continued he, 'was baited and badgered on all sides until she said "yes," when she meant to say "no." There was the aunt at her; there was Chickabiddy at her; and, worse than both, there was the squire at her. They each and all persuaded her, against her will, I know, to consent to marry a gold-mine—for that's what it means, Bill—and, like a great many people in this world, when she's rich she'll be miserable.'

'Ha!' exclaimed the second whip, 'I begin to think it's a blessing not to know what riches are. Fifteen shillings a week and nothing found, but everything to find for yourself, can't be properly called wealth.'

'But you have a few good perquisites, Bill,' observed Cock Robin.

'The squire's old red coats,' replied the

second whip. 'The squire's old top-boots, his old caps, old breeches—sometimes a little too much worn in parts—old shirts, old hose, and his old blundering, stumbling, shambling screws of old lame 'osses to ride. These are my perquisites and privileges, Cocky, with board wages of fifteen shillings a week.'

'And yet with all your grumbling,' rejoined his companion, 'you manage to get on pretty well in the squire's service.'

'He knows when he's got a good servant,' returned Bill Baxter, 'and I know when I've got a good master. If I grumble now and then, or always, as your young missis says, it's my nater to grumble. I can't help it, Cocky, and don't mean to try. That fine, strong young chap didn't join in the cry to urge her to marry the gold-mine, did he?'

'No,' replied Cock Robin, with a slow

and sorrowful shake of the head. 'Mr. Edward is as silent as a mole about the matter, and never mentions it, as far as I can learn, or seems by his looks or actions to know anything about it.'

'And yet he's as well up, I'll be bail,' rejoined the second whip, 'as Chickabiddy himself.'

'He knows too much for his own peace of mind,' returned Cock Robin, dolefully. 'They played and quarrelled with one another, and were sweethearts when little mites of children together, although Mr. Edward used to tease Miss Grizzle in fun sometimes, until getting hold of a stick, and running quite as fast as he could, she'd let him have it across the shoulders in a way which made him holloa for mercy. I used, being a boy myself, to laugh to see her lace him, until the tears rolled down my face.'

‘Ha!’ ejaculated Bill Baxter, emptying the shallow remains of his glass, and taking an advantageous opportunity of refilling it, ‘if a little vexed she’d make him feel what the stick meant, and so she will Chickabiddy. He’ll have to take his licking if he offends her in thought, word, or deed, and it will be the same sort of thing if he doesn’t think, or do just as she wishes him. *I* wouldn’t be in Chickabiddy’s trowsers for double my wages, Cocky, I wouldn’t, indeed!’

‘I would,’ sharply rejoined his companion, ‘and for less than half. She’s a rare plucked-un, no doubt; but only wants a plain snaffle and a light hand. With a little judgment she’d never shy, jib, bolt, rear, or kick.’

‘But you’ve not said a word about her buck-jumping,’ returned the second whip, with an evident desire of having the best

of the argument. 'Not a word about her buck-jumping.'

'I never heard of a young lady buck-jumping,' rejoined Cock Robin, with an approach of contempt at the supposition.

'P'raps not,' added Bill Baxter, 'p'raps not,' repeated, he, swaying his head with the gentle motion of a pendulum. 'But you've heard of young ladies bolting sometimes. She'll bolt, Cocky.'

'You're always saying something against Miss Grizzle,' added his companion, in anything but a conciliatory tone. 'She can't do or say anything right in your eyes; but that's not the opinion of everyone who knows her.'

'P'raps not,' responded the second whip, still maintaining the movement of the pendulum with his head, 'and it may not be mine. But she'll bolt, Cocky, or I'm no prophet. With snaffle or curb, martin-

gale, single or double rein, Chickabiddy will never be able to hold her. She'll take hold of her bit some day, and away she'll go, with Chickabiddy pulling double; but he might as well pull at a tree. Go she will, and I, Bill Baxter—that's me—tell you so, Cocky, and remember my words from this night, henceforth, and for ever more, world without end. She'll bolt.'

At the conclusion of the second whip's most unwelcome prediction, Cock Robin stared vacantly at the floor, as if in deep thought, and, for a few minutes, not a word was spoken by either.

'I begin to think it will go precious hard with poor Mr. Edward,' at length said he. 'In turning a sharp corner in the forest to-day, I came upon him unawares sitting upon a fallen tree in the biting cold wind, with his elbows resting upon his knees, and his face buried be-

tween his hands.' Being close to him, he looked up with a kind of start, and '—the speaker dropped his voice, adding after a pause—'I shall never forget that look, Bill, while I live.'

The second whip gave three short and sharp whiffs from his pipe, and then, withdrawing it from his lips, said,

'Why, he didn't look ready to kill anybody, did he?'

'He did,' replied his companion, in a whisper, turning his head instinctively to see that he was not overheard. 'He did, Bill, quite ready.'

'And do you suspect who it was?' inquired the second whip.

'I do,' responded Cock Robin, dropping his voice until it was scarcely audible. 'I think it was'—and, glancing suspiciously over both shoulders before completing the sentence, added—'*himself*.'

The evening being far advanced, and the bottom of the punch-bowl having become too palpable to admit of the shadow of a doubt as to the exhaustion of its contents, it was deemed expedient to bring the somewhat prolonged sitting to a close, and the two boon companions separated for the night.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. CHELL—her Christian name being Jane, she was familiarly called ‘Jenny’—was in undisturbed possession of a set of chambers in Middle Temple Lane under most exceptional circumstances. Her husband, the departed Luke Chell, had been clerk not only to a rising barrister, but one who had risen to the highest altitude in his profession by being elevated to the judicial bench, and, from some unexplained cause of favouritism, that august body, the benchers of the Middle Temple, as landlords in perpetuity, permitted the transfer

of possession of the judge's chambers to Mrs. Chell's husband, Luke Chell, while he was active in the flesh, and subsequently to his widow when he became passive in the dust.

Acting upon the admirable plan of taking fair advantage of favourable opportunities, the Judge's Chambers were sublet for an improved rent far above that paid to the benchers of the Middle Temple, and Mr. Chell, during his lifetime, pocketed the difference ; while Mrs. Chell, being allowed to remain in undisturbed possession, felt no compunction whatever of conscience in continuing to pocket the difference. Barristers, briefless and otherwise, students, studious and otherwise, came and remained for certain and uncertain periods, and departed like shadows upon a wall, leaving no trace behind them with the exception, now and again, of a few

unpaid bills, which acted prejudicially upon the credit of the incoming tenant of the Judge's Chambers. For a time, and until he had established a position of unquestionable responsibility, Mrs. Chell presented her weekly bill with the utmost regularity, and made no sign of taking her departure until it was in a condition to which her sign manual might be affixed in the form of a receipt in full. Mrs. Chell wished to be considered a woman of business, as her husband had supported the character, over a long series of years, of being a man of business.

Knowing full well the value of money, he had saved, by practising great self-denial, a 'good round sum,' as he called it, against the approach of the proverbial rainy day; but, as he was not exposed to the anticipated soaking, Luke Chell's riches were never utilised by the gatherer, but left

at the absolute disposal of his relict, Jane Chell, commonly called 'Jenny.'

By a shaft of fate the Judge's Chambers, or, to be strictly accurate, the chambers which the judge once occupied, were vacant at the precise moment that Edward Slomax was in search of 'rooms' within a short radius of their fixed centre. The newly-entered student of the Middle Temple stared at the outside of the black oak door upon which was advertised 'Apartments to let,' and after taking quite sufficient time to read the announcement critically, so as to satisfy himself that the composition and orthography were free from error, he pulled the time-worn and finger-rubbed little brass knob, supposed to be linked by a wire to a bell on the inside of the black oak door, and, a faint tinkle-tinkle following, Mrs. Chell appeared before the tinkle-tinkle had ceased to

render itself disagreeable to the ear.

‘Walk in, sir,’ said Mrs. Chell, for she knew without any unnecessary introduction, the object and the subject of the summons for her presence.

Responding to the invitation, Edward Slomax walked in, being closely surveyed, as he did so, by Mrs. Chell, with a view of forming a decision as to the eligibility of his becoming her tenant or not; for in her own opinion she was a good judge of character, and could read a man as well as a book.

The result of the survey appeared to be complimentary to the personal appearance of Edward Slomax, for he had scarcely entered the Judge’s Chambers before he was asked to ‘sit down,’ the seat of the chair meeting with a preliminary dusting from a corner of Mrs. Chell’s apron.

‘You are a young gentleman studying

for the law, I suppose,' she remarked, 'who requires chambers.'

'I was entered a student of the Middle Temple Inn of Court this morning,' replied he, with a smile.

'And thereby means to study for the law which a good many who've been here did the same,' rejoined Mrs. Chell; 'but didn't. At the same time, sir, it gives me much pleasure to say that one did, and he's a living judge.'

From some undefined and inexplicable cause Edward Slomax, upon receiving this interesting piece of information, resolved to agree to the proposed terms without any attempt to modify them, and, having done so, merely asked, 'When he could take possession?'

'As soon as may be most convenient to yourself, sir,' was Mrs. Chell's gracious answer. 'For although,' continued she, 'I

always have required references hitherto I shall not ask *you* for any. I will do away with references.'

Edward Slomax rose from his seat and, as became a gentleman upon receiving a handsome compliment, bowed his best with his right hand pressed upon the left of his breast.

'Send in your luggage, sir,' added Mrs. Chell, her vanity tickled with the most polite bow she ever remembered to have had, 'as soon as you please.'

Her very new tenant, for the agreement if not sealed was settled, expressed his deep sense of the obligation, and then informed Mrs. Chell who he was, where he came from, and the why and wherefore of his being then and there in Middle Temple Lane at that exact moment of the earth's rotation upon her axis, and generally and particularly made Mrs. Chell—who he soon

afterwards took the liberty of calling 'Jenny'—the repository of his family secrets, great and small, strictly excluding one, however, which he retained as a monopoly for his own bitter reflections.

'I feel honoured by your confidence, sir,' rejoined Mrs. Chell, as he concluded his brief personal narrative 'and am pleased to find that I've a celebrated Cambridge man under my roof. As a matter of choice I prefer Cambridge to the sister university Oxford, but why I never could tell, and, probably, never shall. The colour of their riband, perhaps, has something to do with it, for I prefer light blue to dark.'

At this precise point of the interesting conversation between Mrs Chell and her lodger, he casually remarked that, 'being rather hungry, he would return to his hotel and get a mutton chop.'

‘Don’t think of doing that, sir,’ returned Mrs. Chell, quickly. ‘Let me cook a mutton chop for ye. I’ve a clear cinder fire in my kitchen, and you shall see, in a very few minutes, what a mutton chop ought to taste like with some hot mushroom catchup and a mealy potato combined. In the meantime,’ she continued, ‘you can take a look round the apartments, or, as they are called in these legal quarters, chambers, while I am getting ready the mutton chop.’

Not to have readily acquiesced in the proposition regarding the voluntary supply of the mutton chop and mealy potato, must have proved a most ungracious return for the spontaneous offer, and totally foreign to the natural feelings of Edward Slomax. He, therefore, promptly accepted it with a profusion of acknowledgments, and Mrs. Chell retired

from his presence to carry it into effect.

An opportune moment now presented itself for 'looking around,' and he at once began to make himself master of the situation by closely examining the architectural proportions of the chambers, and the useful and ornamental furniture contained within them.

The judge's chambers, once occupied by a judge then living, were correctly described in the plural number, for they consisted of two, and two only, one being appropriated for a sitting-room, in which the judge had eaten innumerable mutton chops that nothing short of a large flock of sheep could possibly have supplied, and the other formed his sleeping apartment, wherein he had slept, dreamt, and snored, and, forgetful of a few brief hours of the world, was probably for a few brief hours by the world forgotten.

In the olden time a Knight Templar's spurs had clanked and his harness jingled in those very chambers, when they formed part of the barracks of the 'monk in peace and soldier in war;' but this was long ago, and they had been modernised since then by paint and whitewash, and the rough, massive oak beam stretching from one end of the low ceiling to the other had been hidden from sight and covered neatly by a longitudinal case of elm, effectually shutting out this witness overhead of the Knight Templar's doings and misdoings, the balance of which might have been creditable or discreditable; but in so far as the silent witness overhead was concerned it remained, as it had long continued, in utter darkness.

Upon the walls were hung in a formal line engravings of departed Lord Chancellors, Chief Justices, and Masters of the

Rolls, robed, wigged, and each and all looking implacably stern, and terribly prepared to deliver judgments from the bench of ruinous effect to unsuccessful suitors. Whether a portrait of the living judge who 'once upon a time' occupied the chambers was among the collection, there was no evidence to show, but there was the easy-chair in which he sat for many years previous to his promotion to the judicial seat, and the newly-entered student of the Middle Temple dropped himself gently into it with a smile of self-satisfaction, as his successor, at least, for the time being.

Pursuing his task of observation, he saw that a faded carpet, somewhat worn, but not altogether shabby, a well-polished mahogany table, in which his features were reflected out of all fair and natural proportions, some chairs, exhibiting de-

cided effects of friction at the corners of the horsehair seats, and an extensive row of empty bookshelves, completed the inventory of the useful furniture in the sitting-room vacated by the living judge, and now most recently tenanted by the newly-entered student of the Middle Temple.

The 'look round' was just completed, when Mrs. Chell re-entered from a private door covered with green baize, and ornamented with brass-headed nails, leading out of and into her kitchen, wherein more mutton chops had been broiled for the living judge than could be conveniently counted, and she proclaimed her presence by the cheery announcement, accompanied by a bustling, fussy manner, that 'it would be done as soon as she had laid a knife and fork and set the table;' but whether she referred exclusively to the

mutton chop, or to the mutton chop and mealy potato combined, must be left to conjecture, for she offered no further explanation upon the subject.

During the short period that Mrs. Chell was most industriously occupied in 'laying the table,' by making a few arrangements with the salt-cellar and pepper-box, her tenant in possession embraced the moments as they flew by, in a figurative sense, taking her photograph.

Mrs. Chell was not only fat, but had been so from her earliest infancy. She was a fat baby, a fat girl, a fat bride, and, at the present time, a fat widow, fair, and some twenty years over forty; but not so much by ten or a dozen years in what may be correctly, if not elegantly described, in her jolly, personal appearance. Short, and even dumpy, was her figure, and yet her movements were agile, and

she almost skipped in placing the salt-cellar and pepper-box in their respective positions upon the table.

Mrs. Chell—wooed and won by Luke Chell as ‘Jenny’—possessed a round and ruddy face, shining from a heart the pulsations of which were governed by ‘doing unto others what she would have them do unto her,’ a model and paragon of neighbours not too frequently met with in the highways and byways of the world. Her eyes were blue, of a cerulean shade, and, having been much admired by Luke Chell in the days that they went blackberrying together in Epping Forest, might have influenced her predilection for the Cambridge colour in preference to that of the sister university.

Be that as it may, she ‘stuck,’ as she said, ‘to light blue,’ and would continue to do so to the end of her days. Her nose

possessed no decided shape, being of the common order of nothing in particular, and her profusion of nut-brown ringlets, 'once upon a time,' were now smoothed in two equal divisions of grey hair over a forehead unwrinkled by woe, notwithstanding Luke Chell had preceded her deliverance from this land of toil and turmoil, and left her to fight out the finish of the battle of life alone, an unprotected, but buxom widow.

His relict felt quite equal to the occasion, and there she flitted in the presence of her new lodger, as she had frequently done in years passed away, ready and willing to do her duty as England might expect, or that part of the British Empire known as Middle Temple Lane.

Mrs. Chell, having arranged the table satisfactorily to herself by placing a knife and fork, one spoon, the salt-cellar and

pepper-box in relative and conventional positions, expressed the earnest hope that the mutton chop and mealy potato were not only done, but done well, and went through the green baize door with a foot-step firm and pronounced in its action, to introduce without further delay the anticipated triumph of her culinary art.

Edward Slomax, even with this short introduction, began to feel quite at home with his landlady, and was almost disposed to take a liberty with her Christian name without further postponement by calling her 'Jenny.'

CHAPTER XIV.

AMONG the professors of arts and sciences specially engaged to render Miss Penelope Peepem's niece one of the most clever and accomplished young ladies in the county of Hampshire, and an unapproachable distance from its acknowledged boundaries, was the well-known local apothecary, 'Tom Tidy,' a man of learning, albeit it had been chiefly acquired through his own teaching. Without arrogating to himself any particular distinction, it was generally admitted within the range of the smoke from his own chimney pot, even when

blown by a strong wind, that 'the doctor was a clever little fellow,' and knew a great deal more about things than he thought it advisable to talk about.

As a licentiate of Apothecary's Hall he possessed the indisputable right of poisoning his neighbours either by chance or design; but had fortunately escaped the suspicion of any charge of professional neglect or criminal intention to kill the most insignificant subject in the realm. And yet it could not be alleged with proper regard to veracity that Tom Tidy was strictly attentive in person to his medical business. Being an enthusiastic naturalist he was too often in pursuit of moths and butterflies, scampering through fields and forest net in hand, instead of standing behind the counter of his little chemist's shop awaiting, perhaps, the ingress of the

next patient for a couple of mysterious pills, and a complicated blend in the form of a nauseous black draught. It should be stated however, that under these circumstances Tom Tidy in his absence did not permit that the demand should not meet with a prompt supply.

His assistant and housekeeper, Mrs. John Sprat, commonly called by the rudest boys in the village 'Jack Sprat,' had imperative instructions from her employee to go to a certain drawer for the pills, and to a certain bottle marked in conspicuous letters 'Aqua Puera,' for the draught. What the pills consisted of was a profound secret with the doctor; but, as nobody suffered the smallest harm from taking them, it may fairly be supposed that they were quite as innoxious as the 'Aqua Puera' itself which, if described in plain English, might have

been suspected to have come from a neighbouring pump, and so defeated the object of creating professional mystery.

When not engaged in chasing moths and butterflies Tom Tidy attended to his practice. When occupied with the capture of specimens for his ever increasing collection, his assistant, Mrs. John Sprat, too frequently addressed by the rudest boys in the village as 'Jack Sprat,' much to her lofty indignation, undertook his responsible duties by dispensing the medicines, in strict accordance with the solemn injunctions she had received, from the drawer containing the pills and the bottle containing the 'Aqua Puera.'

Such were the fundamental principles upon which Tom Tidy conducted his limited local practice, combining the business of life in bleeding, blistering, and physicking with its unalloyed pleasure in the study

of natural history ; the latter being much preferred to the former.

The world—or a very small part of it—having accorded to Tom Tidy the reputation for being ‘a clever little fellow,’ Miss Penelope sought his aid in imparting a few of his accomplishments to her niece, and to render her a sharer in the firm of ‘Tidy & Co.’ in so far, at least, as the natural history branch was concerned.

Unlike Signor Vesprucci, and one or two more professors of the arts and sciences who essayed their best, too frequently with questionable results, to impart some of their acquirements to Griselda Peepem, ‘the clever little fellow was a great favourite of hers from the introduction of his teaching to its close, and upon his regular day of attendance at Forester’s Lodge she greeted him cordially upon his arrival, and listened to all he had

to say with profound attention from the beginning of his lecture to the announcement that it had been brought to a close. For it was no task to her to listen to his pleasant talk about bees and butterflies, or to look at the beautiful specimens he frequently brought for examination through the microscope.

Years had passed since he attended to give the first lecture, and now—consistent with the universal order of all things—the day had arrived, as arrive it must, for him to give the last.

As a matter of historical fact, nature had not been too liberal in her personal gifts to Tom Tidy. In a literal sense he was a little fellow with high sloping shoulders not dissimilar in shape to a champagne bottle. His knees bent inward and his legs were entirely devoid of those muscular developments commonly called ‘calves.’

The form of his features was long, the colour pale, and the general expression and effect created the instinctive idea that he might have been occupied in playing the flute during the greater part of his sublunary existence.

As a medical man he seemed to think he ought to appear in public in a suit of sombre black with a white cravat 'got up' by Mrs. John Sprat; but not possessing, perhaps, unlimited credit with his tailor, and his laundress being rather too economical with the starch, his dress, even at the best of times, bore the united effect of shabbiness and flabbiness without the smallest vain effort of concealment.

Upon the arrival of the day, however, which came round periodically once a week, for him to give his pupil a lesson in natural history, Tom Tidy 'brushed himself up,' as he called it, and presented

as full dress an appearance as those best of cosmetics, soap and water, and a careful attention to the details of his toilette would admit of producing.

It being mutually understood that this would be the concluding lecture after the long term of several long years, the professor and his pupil were somewhat disposed to be reticent as they sat opposite each other one morning in the breakfast-parlour of Forester's Lodge, the one scarcely prepared to speak as usual, and the other scarcely prepared to listen.

Sam was present in possession of an arm-chair, with his nose dividing his fore-paws, and his eyes turned upwards watching events, but with a full and comprehensive knowledge of what was going on, both active and passive, Sam looked in anything but good spirits. Sam was depressed.

‘And so, Mr. Tidy, you have come to give me the last delightful and instructive lesson in natural history,’ said Griselda, throwing herself back in her seat, with her head on a folded arm resting on the back of the chair.

Tom Tidy sighed from the little bottom of his little heart, but said not a syllable in reply.

‘Have you brought some fresh caught and unfortunate victim impaled on a pin and choked with brimstone to show me,’ she asked, ‘killed because of its beauty?’

‘No,’ replied the professor, almost sharply. ‘I thought it better that the conclusion of my lectures should not be associated with cruelty, even if justified by necessity.’

‘Justified by necessity!’ reiterated Griselda, in a suppressed tone, as if speaking to herself. ‘This is a most cruel world, Mr. Tidy,’ continued she, ‘and I have

often thought that the beautiful creatures of the earth suffer more pain and persecution than the ugly.'

'I cannot admit the existence of ugliness,' responded the professor. 'We may often see shapes, forms, colours, and effects which are opposed to our conceptions of the symmetrical and harmonious: but upon close examination they will be found to command our equal admiration for their wonderful proportions, marvelous formation, and singular adaptation for the special purposes for which they were designed. There is no such thing in nature, Miss Peepem, as ugliness.'

'Not in men and women,' rejoined she, 'and all the beasts of the field?'

Tom Tidy pressed the ends of two fingers upon his lips, and coughed slightly, in order to gain a little time for shaping a reply.

‘Men and women,’ resumed he, after a short pause, ‘by the grand and gradual process of evolution, which is ever working towards the ultimate end—perfection—are the apex of the tree of life, having ascended from——’

‘Reputable monkeyhood,’ interrupted Griselda, ‘as I have been given to understand.’

‘Yes,’ returned the professor, ‘I see no reason to throw the shadow of a doubt upon the preceding link to the long chain of human development.’

‘I am really quite glad to hear you say so, Mr. Tidy,’ responded his pupil, ‘and feel a natural monkey pride in my descent.’

‘Ascent, Miss Peepem, if you please,’ returned Tom Tidy, ‘not descent. We have climbed to our present exalted position, not——’

‘Tumbled to it,’ added she, with a laugh which, although heard, was without any visible effect. ‘And yet I’ve been told more than once that we are creatures fallen from a state of unqualified perfection.’

Tom Tidy again pressed the ends of two fingers upon his lips, and paused before resuming the subject.

‘In a physical and material point of view, Miss Peepem,’ continued he, ‘I can only state, without the smallest reservation for a doubt to——’

‘Have a little peg to hang upon.’

‘The very expressive words I was about to add,’ said the professor, ‘when you were considerate enough, Miss Peepem, to relieve me from the necessity of uttering them. I repeat,’ continued he, ‘that there can be no question upon the fact, as the successive pages in the book of nature

reveal, spread open for all to read who will only use their eyes to correct conventional errors, and render valuable additions to their already acquired knowledge, that we have risen to our present high position in the animal sphere through incalculable ages of evolution, and the general type of our bodies is common alike to fish, fowl, frog, and——’

‘Monkey,’ added Griselda. ‘Pray do not omit the monkey, as he is so immeasurably superior, in my opinion, to one or two of the lords of creation that I am acquainted with.’

Tom Tidy begged to be distinctly understood that he had not the slightest objection to include the monkey.

‘Man’s place in nature,’ continued the professor, ‘is indisputable. He is the head of the quadruped class——’

‘But he hasn’t four legs as far as *I* have seen,’ interrupted his pupil.

‘His direct and immediate ancestors had,’ rejoined the professor, ‘and man, therefore, is scientifically classed among the quadrupeds.’

‘With donkeys, apes, pigs, and all the other beasts of the field,’ returned Griselda, with a now unconcealed, merry laugh.

‘Yes, Miss Peepem,’ added Tom Tidy, ‘they may be included among the near relations to man in his assigned place in nature. In fact, Miss Peepem, he can only claim his position in the animal world which every creature with a backbone possesses an equally legitimate share, if in a less degree.’

‘A mouse, then,’ observed his pupil, ‘may be regarded as one of his backbone relatives.’

‘Without the shade of the shadow of a doubt,’ responded the professor. ‘A mouse, indeed,’ continued he, ‘has quite as sensitive a nervous system, and, considering the scale of its anatomy, an unquestionably superior development of strength and muscular power than man.’

‘What an upstart and ridiculous sham, then, he is!’ exclaimed Griselda. ‘I begin to feel the utmost contempt for him. It would be great fun,’ continued she, ‘to tell a lord of the creation I am acquainted with, of his decided inferiority to a mouse.’

‘Notwithstanding his lowly origin, however, man is the paragon of animals, Miss Peepem, and occupies the highest position among the children of life,’ said the professor, ‘albeit he inherits the essentials of the mammals, which may be traced from

the duck-billed water-mole to those of a more exalted and elaborate nature such as the bats and——’

‘Monkeys,’ added his pupil. ‘Please put in the monkeys. Aunt is so fond of them.’

‘Having accidentally and incidentally overheard this statement referring personally to myself,’ returned a voice, ‘I confess my admiration for *two* monkeys;’ and there stood Miss Penelope Peepem, prepared to make as graceful a curtsy to Tom Tidy as was ever rendered in homage to a monarch.

The professor rose with a jerk from his seat, as if touched by a spiral spring, and brought his nose within a few measurable inches of his knees.

Miss Penelope Peepem lowered herself gradually and perceptibly.

Tom Tidy made an effort to bring

the point of his nose lower than his knees.

Miss Penelope Peepem drooped, and then drooped lower than before.

Tom Tidy tried to bring the point of his nose about the centre of the exact spot where his calves ought to be and failed.

Miss Penelope Peepem rose majestically from almost a sitting position upon the floor, and felt herself mistress of the situation.

‘I hope, madam,’ said he, advancing towards her with a tripping step, ‘that we are in a state of perfect salubrity.’

It ought, perhaps, to be recorded here that if ‘we’—that is, Miss Penelope Peepem—had given either an affirmative or negative in reply, the result would have been precisely the same—two pills at night and a restorative draught in the morning.

‘How, madam, may I delicately inquire, are your bools?’ inquired he, softening or modifying the substantive so as to reduce it of as much harshness as possible.

With her eyes cast modestly downwards, Miss Penelope expressed the belief that her ‘bools’ were remarkably right.

‘In that case,’ rejoined the medical man, feeling her pulse with a gentle pressure, ‘we must do our best to keep them right. Permit me the honour of looking at your tongue.’

Miss Penelope complied to a certain extent by thrusting forth the tip of her tongue from between her screwed up lips, which looked not dissimilar to a cherry, cherry ripe.

‘Very good,’ added he, ‘very good indeed.’

The two pills, however, and restorative

draught were inevitable, notwithstanding the unqualified admission of the satisfactory state of Miss Penelope Peepem's 'bools.'

'I will send, madam,' resumed Tom Tidy, with the blandest of his professional smiles, 'the usual weekly corrective. Being right, we cannot do better than exercise our skill in keeping them right. If wrong, we cannot do better than exercise our skill in making them right. I draw these respective finalities from a long professional experience, if not altogether allied to a large professional country practice. Much depends upon our bools, and greatly augmented happiness to the human family at large would follow in the shape of a foregone conclusion, if more affectionate attention was paid to them. My first question to a patient invariably is, im-

pressed as I am with the depth of its importance, how are your boots?’

Miss Penelope Peepem curtsied again lowly, and far beneath the average depth ; but, not being desirous of continuing the delicate subject, said nothing more in reply, and so brought it to an abrupt termination.

‘Your cavalier will soon arrive,’ she said, addressing her niece, ‘mounted on his noble steed.’

‘His noble steed!’ repeated Griselda, with a decided loop in the corner of her upper lip. ‘His noble steed looks more like a camel than a horse.’

‘Not being a judge of the symmetrical form and shape of a horse,’ rejoined Miss Penelope Peepem, ‘I do not pretend to dispute your assertion of Mr. Chickabiddy’s noble steed bearing a close resemblance to a camel ; but still I must say that he looks

to me more like a horse, particularly in the immediate locality of the tail. He certainly has no hump.'

Griselda made no observation in reply, but the loop in the corner of the upper lip became rather more decided in the curve.

'I fear, Mr. Tidy,' continued his patient, who was never out of his hands all the year round, 'that I must ask you the favour to excuse my niece from further attention to your charming lecture on natural history. She is engaged to ride this morning with her cavalier, Mr. Orlando Chickabiddy, and the time has arrived——'

Griselda's departure from the room must have been of the most sudden and abrupt kind, for, upon raising her eyes to the seat occupied by her one moment before, Miss Penelope Peepem discovered that it was empty.

‘For her to adjust her raiment,’ she continued, ‘for this pleasant, poetical, and practical purpose.’

Tom Tidy bowed low, as became a gentleman when not knowing what to do better.

Miss Penelope Peepem curtsied lower, maintaining unbroken silence with the graceful movement.

Tom Tidy again tried whether the point of his nose could possibly be reached where his calves might be expected to be seen, and once more failed from want of elasticity in his backbone.

Miss Penelope Peepem drooped by degrees lower and lower still, until, the surface of the floor being reached, there was no lower level between herself and the carpet.

‘Good morning, madam,’ said her now defeated medical man.

‘Good morning, sir,’ responded his now

victorious patient, and they separated then and there, as they had done often before much in the same way.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER having been in the fostering care of the Court of Chancery for many years, and left entirely to the occupancy of the rats, owls, and bats, Hawkhurst had been restored and renovated, quite regardless of expense, by its present owner, Orlando Chickabiddy, Esq. Determined, as he said, to render his mansion second to none in the county, the old, deserted, modern ruin had a new face given to it, and, through the application of paint, paper, varnish, and whitewash, with a few other auxiliaries of the decorator's art, no one

would have suspected that the wreck of the Chancery suit could have been patched up, furbished, and polished into the almost glittering edifice now in the possession of and tenanted by its legal freeholder, Orlando Chickabiddy, Esq.

When sold by the arbitrary order of the Court of Chancery, there were no trees upon the adjacent grounds of Hawkhurst. They had been already cut down root and branch, and, when an injunction 'to restrain from further felling' was obtained by a successful litigant, not a stick remained bigger than his thumb to fell. Devoid, therefore, of all shade and shadows of trees, the 'mansion' stood out stark and bare, looking much more conspicuous than picturesque, notwithstanding the lavish expenditure in restoring the old wreck of the Chancery suit.

Refinement of taste might be ques-

tioned, and questionable, in the gorgeous furniture of Hawkhurst, and the paintings profusely adorning its walls in square yards of canvas, but no one could gainsay that the chairs and tables were almost radiant with polish, and the surrounding gilt frames looked from their depth, width, and breadth much more valuable even than the pictures themselves.

Be that, however, as it may, Orlando Chickabiddy felt perfectly satisfied and gratified with the general and particular effect of his 'mansion,' inside and outside, and entertained the firm belief that it defied competition.

At about that season of the year, when the young rooks begin to caw, Mr. Chickabiddy might have been seen, after a light breakfast, consisting of a single egg, lolling or lounging in a well-stuffed cushioned chair, mentally adding up, subtracting

from, and balancing accounts in connection with the past, present, and the future. No witness being within sight or hearing, he felt relief, perhaps, in giving vent to the concealment of his thoughts and indulge in a soliloquy.

‘Upon my sacred word of honour,’ said he, rubbing his fingers together, not unlike the soft action of a cat when purring. ‘Upon my sacred word of honour,’ he repeated, ‘there appear to be only two kinds of coves or chaps in this blessed world, rogues and fools. Now, I am not going to say to which particular class I belong, but it isn’t the fools, I know. For here am I, a landed proprietor, owner of this strikingly handsome and elegantly furnished mansion, and engaged to be married to the prettiest gal in all the county of Hampshire.’

At this point in his address to himself

Mr. Orlando Chickabiddy chuckled, and for a few moments was solely occupied in chuckling.

‘How the young chaps of the neighbourhood look at me when they see us riding out together,’ at length continued he. ‘Upon my sacred word of honour their eyes flash lightning! But what do I care? They couldn’t buy her and I did, although I can’t say she has seemed particularly pleased or satisfied with the purchase and sale from that day to this.’

Mr. Chickabiddy paused in his speech, and drummed a few bars of a popular tune upon the elbow of his easy chair.

‘Her old fool of an aunt and John Oakacre, the chairman of my gold company’—the speaker chuckled with additional force—‘put the screw upon her objections, and after a little too much see-saw between yes and no to be altogether complimen-

tary to the sole proprietor of a gold mine——’

Mr. Orlando Chickabiddy cut short his delivery by bursting into a loud, hoarse laugh which, at the same time, did not sound as if fully charged with mirth.

‘She at last said yes, when, upon my sacred word of honour, I believe she would have much preferred saying no. But what do I care? She’s mine, or will be mine, through money, which has given me everything that I possess in this world, from a blacking brush to a silver spoon, and so long as I get what I want, I don’t mean to quarrel with what I get or how I get it. Sufficient for me that I know it’s in button-hole park, which means my pocket.’

Mr. Chickabiddy united a few more bars of the popular melody, and then resumed the thread of his unlistened-to speech.

‘Talk about fools,’ said he, ‘just think for a moment about this gold mine. I come down here without knowing or being known by a single soul, and starting with a bit of shine as the owner of Hawkhurst, and scattering a few sovereigns about as a good investment for my purpose, I am believed to be, what I take great care to describe myself, a man of wealth and the sole proprietor of a gold mine. A gold mine!’ repeated Mr. Chickabiddy, with a sneer. ‘Well! a gold mine is one thing and a mine of gold another, which the adventurers in my rich and auriferous lode will find out sooner or later; but quite as soon as anyone of them will feel much pleasure in finding out.’

The speaker tried a few more bars of the melody upon the arm of the chair, and collected his thoughts by way of a prelimin-

ary to the continuance of his solitary discourse.

‘I knew it would be so. No sooner had I caught John Oakacre for chairman of the company, and publicly announced him as such, than the whole county of Hampshire, or this part of it, made a bull’s rush for the shares, neither he nor a fool among them knowing more of the so-called gold mine, than if quarried in the moon, and yet head over heels they tumble to stake their all in a venture which is set forth only in a prospectus written by Orlando Chickabiddy, Esquire. Talk about fools! The world is choked with them, and they seem born to be robbed.’

The speaker again broke off in his address to himself, and had recourse to a little more music during the interval.

‘There’ll be a blow up by -an’-by of course,’

continued he, 'but that won't be just yet. John Oakacre, his friends, neighbours, and acquaintances must all, to a moral certainty, be dropped in the hole, and Griselda's old fool of an aunt will squall like a cat in a trap when she finds out what marrying her niece to a gold mine means. Ha, ha, ha! Let those laugh who win, and I shall be found among the winners.'

This reflection seemed to afford immense delight to Mr. Chickabiddy; for a fixed smile took possession of his features, and the angles of his mouth were drawn back as far as they could be stretched exposing to view nearly the whole of his teeth. Gradually, however, they were relaxed, and regaining their normal position, a more than ordinary seriousness usurped the place of Mr. Chickabiddy's broad grin.

Drawing a hand slowly across his fore-

head he stared at the Turkey carpet at his feet as if reading in the oriental pattern a communication of anything but an agreeable nature, and delivered much too abruptly for the composure of his nervous system.

‘But what will Griselda say to all this?’ at length whispered he hoarsely to himself, and his countenance became contracted and deeply lined as he spoke. ‘What will Griselda say to all this?’ he repeated, with the fixed stare still riveted upon the carpet and his hands pressed closely upon a brow now becoming feverish with thought. ‘She will then be Mrs. Chickabiddy, and as such I shall catch it hot, *very* hot, morning, noon, and perhaps night. When the smash-up comes, as come it must, I shall have slipped out with the coin, and John Oakacre, his friends, neighbours, and acquaintances will have slipped in the deep

hole to drop it. But what will Mrs. Chickabiddy say?’

There was now a lengthened pause, and the speaker looked truly disturbed, and far distant from a state of mental tranquillity.

‘She’s generally spoken of as a high spirited gal in these parts,’ at length continued he, ‘but I call her as fiery a young bit of muslin as ever I saw or ever wish to see, and I shouldn’t like to be in a small room with her alone when devilish out of temper. It wouldn’t be safe. In a large apartment such as this, one might be able to dodge her a bit under the table and get out of her reach a little ; but no small room for me with the future Mrs. Chickabiddy in a towering passion. She probably would get one’s back in a corner and hit out straight for the nose, and if she did the consequence might be too dreadful to contemplate. The shape if not the size would be altered to a

certainly, and the lasting effect perhaps anything but an improvement to one's beauty. I must certainly take precautions against the announcement of the smash-up; but what to do at the present moment I'm at a decided loss to speculate upon. It's very serious,' continued Orlando Chickabiddy, 'very serious, indeed, and I don't altogether like the aspect of affairs,' and he recommenced the rub-a-dub upon the arm of the easy chair; but the strain was anything but lively.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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